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## The Silver Sharp Detective

OR,

### The Big Rustle at XL Ranch.

A STORY OF WYOMING.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,  
AUTHOR OF "THE ACTRESS DETECTIVE," "JOE  
PHENIX, THE POLICE SPY," "TALBOT  
OF CINNABAR," ETC., ETC.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### THE GUILTY CLERK.

PETERKIN AND PETERKIN, bankers, one of the  
"gilt-edged" firms of Wall street, New York  
City's great money center.

Andrew, the father, and Milton, the son, com-  
posed the firm, reputed to be one of the most  
prosperous in the "street."

Cool, crafty, long-headed men both of them,  
and, to use the common saying, it was "a cold  
day when either of them got left."

It was night, and the city clocks had just  
struck ten, yet in the private office of Peterkin  
and Peterkin the gas was burning brightly.

At such a time Wall street, which is as full of

ON THROUGH THE NIGHT WENT THE RUSTLERS WITH THE HELPLESS SILVER SHARP,  
STRAIGHT FOR THE LONE RANCH.



life as a bee-hive during business hours, is like a deserted village.

The private office was in the rear, and so arranged that when the curtain of a single window was pulled down those within the office were completely screened from observation.

Wall street is, probably, as well guarded as any money quarter in the world, for in addition to the regular police, there is a well-trained force of watchmen paid by private individuals, and the fact that there was a light in the private office of the brokers would have immediately attracted attention had not the elder Peterkin spoke to both the watchman and the policeman in regard to the matter.

"There is a little snarl in our books," he said, "and we are going to attempt to straighten it out to-night, so do not be alarmed at seeing a light in the private office."

Being thus forewarned the vigilant guardians of the night paid no attention to the matter.

Within the office, diligently examining the books, were the head of the firm, hard-faced old Andrew Peterkin, and the head clerk of the establishment, Roderick Bellingham, a smoothly-shaven, dashy-looking fellow; a young man who paid such particular attention to his personal appearance as to render him liable to the suspicion that he was a dude.

The pair had been hard at work for three hours, having begun their examination promptly at seven, and as the French clock, which ornamented the mantle-piece, finished striking ten, the broker laid down his pen, leaned back in his chair and surveyed the clerk with an expression upon his face which boded no good to him.

Bellingham followed the example of his employer, but there was no expression of anxiety, nothing but placid unconcern upon his countenance.

"Well, sir, to what conclusion have you arrived?" asked the broker, in a harsh voice, full of menace.

"It seems to me that there is a shortage of about five thousand dollars," the clerk replied, consulting the sheet of paper which he had covered with figures.

"Yes, five thousand and fifty dollars and thirty-five cents," the broker remarked, casting his eyes upon the sheet of paper before him which was also covered with figures.

"I said about five thousand; I did not pay any attention to the odd dollars and cents," the other replied, carelessly, as though he considered the matter to be one of small importance.

"Oh!" the broker grunted, in a tone of extreme displeasure. "I presume that fifty dollars and thirty-five cents is but a trifle in your estimation, and yet I have known big firms to go to the wall because they were not able to raise such an amount."

"Yes, I have no doubt such a thing has happened. I have heard of a man committing suicide because he was hungry and couldn't raise enough money to buy a meal."

"I do not believe that you would ever do anything of the kind," the broker observed, sarcastically.

"Oh, no, I am not fool enough. I believe that the world owes me a living, and I am determined to have it," Bellingham replied.

"Well, now in regard to this shortage, sir? As far as I can see, you are responsible for it," Peterkin observed, sternly.

"I must admit that it does appear to look that way," the clerk remarked, placidly, apparently not at all disturbed by the accusation.

The coolness of the man angered the broker.

"To speak plainly, you have stolen the sum of five thousand and fifty dollars and thirty-five cents," the broker cried, sternly.

"Now, my dear Mr. Peterkin, you are using extremely harsh language—language which is entirely out of place in Wall street," the clerk remarked, in a tone of mild rebuke. "In this classic spot men do not steal. Only common, vulgar ruffians do that. Here, in the 'street,' when a gentleman takes advantage of the trust reposed in him to help himself to cash which belongs to somebody else it is not termed stealing, but financial irregularity."

"Bosh! I have no patience with such nonsense," the broker exclaimed. "Soft words butter no parsnips. You admit that you have stolen this money, and now I want to know what you are going to do about it?"

"Softly, softly, my dear Mr. Peterkin," the clerk exclaimed. "You have made a great mistake. I do not admit anything of the kind. I said that the money was missing, and that it seemed as if I was responsible for it, but this is an uncertain world, you know, and it is not always safe to go by appearances."

"I do not see how there can be any doubt about this matter," the broker exclaimed. "The money is gone, stolen by you, and your theft concealed by false figures."

"Part of your statement is correct and cannot be disputed," the clerk remarked, as grave as a judge. "The money is gone, and its absence concealed by some clever juggling with figures, but as to who is responsible for the fact is a question. I most certainly am not willing to admit that it is myself. In fact, I am in the condition of the Irishman, who, upon being ques-

tioned by the judge in regard to his guilt, replied that he could not tell until he had heard the evidence."

"Enough of this levity!" cried Peterkin, in a great rage. "I am not in a mood to be trifled with! You alone are responsible for this crime. No one else could have had a hand in it."

"My dear Mr. Peterkin, I can perceive that you are losing your temper and regret to observe it, for it leads you to make statements that are not warranted by the facts in the case," Bellingham remarked, as bland and respectful as though he was talking up a big financial transaction.

"What do you mean?" demanded the broker, amazed by the coolness of the other.

"Why, your statement that I was the only man who could have taken this money and doctored the books."

"No one but you could have done it!"

"Not correct!" Bellingham replied, shaking his head in a very decided manner.

"Who else? Who could have got at the funds and then altered the books so that the shortage could not be discovered without a long and careful examination?"

"Your son, my friend, Milton Peterkin; he could get at the money as easily as I, and at the books also, and as he writes a hand so like mine that it would baffle the finest expert in penmanship to tell one from the other, I don't see how it can be determined which one of us is the guilty man."

"The idea is absurd!" the broker declared, promptly. "Perfectly ridiculous!" he added. "My son is a partner in the concern, and it would be the height of folly to suppose that he would be guilty of robbing himself."

"This is a very ingenious scheme of yours to shift the responsibility upon somebody else, but it will not work."

"That remains to be seen," Bellingham rejoined with perfect coolness.

"Now, I am going to give you one last chance," the broker remarked.

"A last chance?" asked Bellingham.

"Yes; if you can make good this money, and a trifle more, say a thousand to pay me for the trouble which you have caused me to take, the matter may be arranged. I hate to send a young man of your abilities to the State Prison."

"Particularly when you think you see a chance to collar a thousand ducats by not doing so," the clerk remarked with a decided touch of sarcasm.

The broker frowned.

"If you are wise you will not question my motives but hasten to avail yourself of the clemency I offer."

The other shook his head.

"Oh, no, not this evening, some other evening," Bellingham replied, mockingly.

The broker grew red with rage.

"You miserable scoundrel, do you dare to laugh at me?" he cried.

"Oh, no, I have too high a respect for you, my dear Mr. Peterkin, to do anything of the kind," the clerk replied with mock humility. "And then too, haven't you got me under your thumb? Does it not rest with you to say whether I shall breathe the pure air of heaven or be locked up in a prison cell?"

The broker gazed, searchingly, in the face of the other before he replied.

This speech sounded as if the clerk was beginning to realize that he was in a tight place, but Peterkin was doubtful in regard to whether this was so or not.

"What you have stated is a fact," he said, "but from the way in which you talked I began to think that you did not realize it."

"Oh, well, when a man is helpless he is apt to be careless in regard to his conversation."

"How helpless? what do you mean? It seems to me that I have made you a fair offer."

"Oh, yes, but I cannot avail myself of it."

"Why not?"

"Lack of funds," the clerk replied, shrugging his shoulders. "If you had offered to square the matter for a thousand dollars, instead of putting on a thousand extra, I could not have raised the money."

"Is that correct?"

"It is."

"But you have wealthy relatives who will undoubtedly come to your aid when they understand how desperate the case is," the broker suggested.

Bellingham laughed.

"I should be leaning on a rotten reed indeed if I depended upon any of my relatives doing anything for me. There is not one of them who would be apt to lift his hand to do anything for me, unless indeed it was to contribute to purchase a rope by means of which my earthly career might be ended," the clerk remarked in an extremely jocose manner.

The broker meditated over the matter for a moment. He was disappointed.

He had arranged to catch the clerk in a trap in the hope that when the man found that he was fast he might not only make good the amount that was missing but pay a thousand extra, but now he saw plainly that there was not any hope of carrying out such an arrangement, and he was decidedly annoyed.

"Well, can you suggest any manner in which the affair can be arranged?" Peterkin asked at last.

"Indeed I cannot!" Bellingham replied with prompt decision. "As far as I can see you are five thousand dollars out, and you are likely to remain so as far as I am concerned, for I know I can never raise the money."

"I am sorry for it," the broker remarked, slowly. "I did not want to press you to the wall, but, under the circumstances, I cannot see any other course open to me. Perhaps, too, when your wealthy relatives discover how you are situated there may be some of them willing to assist you."

"My dear Mr. Peterkin, you will be woefully deceived if you build any hope upon that!" the clerk replied, immediately. "I know my loving kindred, and I can assure you that there is not one of them who would not be more likely to contribute to help me to depart from this world rather than to keep me in it, and you might as well resign yourself to the fact that your little five thousand has gone where the woodbine twineth first as well as last."

The flippant tone in which Bellingham spoke irritated the broker fully as much as the words.

"Well, well, if I can not recover my money I can have satisfaction out of you!" he snarled.

"Yes, that looks probable just now, but this is such an uncertain world that it is hard to predict just what will happen; the best laid plans of mice and men slip up very often, to modernize the old saying," the clerk remarked, smiling in the face of the enraged broker.

"I think you will find that there will not be anything uncertain about your case!" exclaimed Peterkin, rising. "My son is at hand with a detective, waiting for my signal, and when that is once given, your fate is sealed."

"But if I am willing to enter into some arrangement with you, that signal will not be given, eh?" the clerk queried.

"You are correct. If you can satisfy me that there is some chance of my getting my money back, with a thousand added to pay me for my trouble, I will be willing to compromise the matter with you."

"Well, I am not much of a lawyer, but it seems to me that this is a great deal like what a legal gentleman would call compounding a felony," Bellingham remarked in a thoughtful way.

An ugly scowl appeared on the hard face of the broker.

"It matters not what the transaction can be called!" he exclaimed. "The point is, are you able to arrange your part of it?"

"Oh, no, not the slightest chance of it," the other answered promptly. "I told you that before; and when it comes down to business, you can depend upon every word I say, for that is the kind of a man I am. I have not been in your office five years for nothing."

The broker turned away with an impatient gesture, and took two steps toward the door.

Bellingham was on his feet as quickly and as noiselessly as a cat.

He passed around the table, and with a short club, which he had held in his hand, concealed from view by the table, dealt the broker a powerful blow in the back of the head.

Peterkin threw up his hands, staggered, gave utterance to a single low groan, and then sunk to the floor, Bellingham catching him in his arms as he fell, so as to break the shock of the fall.

"It strikes me that this job is up to the mark of a professional cracksman," the clerk remarked, as he bent over the senseless man. "Now for the key of the box where the aged Peterkin keeps his wealth."

This was soon in the hands of the clerk: then he approached the safe, easily opened it, as he possessed a knowledge of the combination, unlocked the broker's strong box by the aid of the key, but was disappointed upon discovering that it only contained a couple of hundred dollars.

"Now, this is what I call deuced unhandsome treatment!" he exclaimed. "From the way in which old Peterkin always referred to the contents of this box, and the particular care he took of it, I was led to believe that it contained five or six thousand dollars at the least."

"The broker is a fraud, but this will do to help me on my way, for after this night's work, I must seek concealment in the wilds of the West."

"Go West, young man, and grow up with the country," and that will be my little game now.

"I think I can see that my dear friend, young Milton, is playing the 'double-cross' on me, as a sporting man would say. He advised me not to seek safety in flight when I became satisfied that the old man's suspicions had become roused and suspected he was going to overhaul the books. 'Stay and face it out' was his counsel, and then, when he learned that the old man intended to have him lay in wait with a detective, ready to arrest me if I did not come to terms, he arranged a nice little scheme by means of which I could escape. He would provide the detective, or dummy, of course, and after we got into the street I could make a bolt for liberty."



"Now I am no fool, and I did not believe that my dear friend, Milton, was anxious to have me get off. He is as deep in the mud as I am in the mire, for he had more than half the money, but if I was arrested all the blame could be thrown upon me, and I got the impression that Milton intended to make a scape-goat out of me, but I know a trick worth two of that."

Bellingham returned to the broker again.

"Well, the sand-club completely laid out the old man," he remarked as he bent over the prostrate form.

And then he made a discovery which caused him to start and whitened his face for a moment.

The broker was dead.

"As Heaven is my judge I did not intend to kill the man!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "It was an accident, for I only intended to put him to sleep for a while so that I could have a chance to escape."

"It is a most unlucky accident for now I will have the dogs of the law yelping at my heels at a great rate. I must be off without delay!"

He hurried to the door of the private office; the key was on the outside and he transferred it to the inner; then he passed over the threshold and closed the door behind him; from his pocket he drew a pair of nippers, the tools so commonly used by sneak thieves to unlock doors from the outside by grasping the end of the key projecting through the lock.

By means of the nippers he locked the door.

"There, when they come and find the door locked upon the inside, they will surely hesitate for a few minutes before they break it open and that will give me time to escape."

Quitting the office he hid himself behind the half-opened solid front door.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE WATCHERS.

In the shadow of the portal of the next building to the one in which the office of Peterkin and Peterkin was situated two men were concealed.

One was a rather tall, thin young man, so like the elder Peterkin that any one would have suspected the relationship between them.

This was Milton, the only son of the broker.

His companion was a young man, a little under the medium size, but with a well-built figure which suggested the athlete. He had a good-looking face, a trifle effeminate in its appearance, yet the resolute chin and firm-set mouth seemed to indicate that neither will nor courage were wanting.

The pair had been on the watch since half-past eight, for the broker had shrewdly calculated that it would take from an hour and a half to two hours to get the books straightened out. As it had happened it had taken three hours to do the work.

Few words had passed between the two watchers until after the clock struck ten, and then young Peterkin, beginning to get wearied, remarked:

"This is an uncommon long and tiresome wait."

"Yes, it is."

"But I suppose that men in your business get used to such things."

"Oh, yes, our game is not always ready to fall into our hands the moment we make an appearance on the scene."

Young Peterkin surveyed the quiet-spoken detective for a few moments with decided interest.

"Do you know that you are about the last man in the world that I would have picked out for a detective?" he exclaimed, abruptly.

"So much the better for my success in my calling then," the other replied. "A detective whose business could be suspected from his looks would not be apt to be of much use."

"That is true," the young man remarked, struck by the force of the reasoning. "How long have you been engaged in this sort of work?"

"I am a new hand at it, and seldom have anything to do with cases of this kind. I am not a regular but an extra; as it happened though when your father applied to Headquarters I was the only man at hand, and as a detective was wanted immediately the chief dispatched me."

"Ah, yes, I see. What is your name by the way?"

"Serene—H. Serene."

"Well, that is an odd name!"

"Yes, it is not common."

"Suppose this man attempts to resist when you place him under arrest?" young Peterkin asked, abruptly.

"It is but seldom that a party of this kind is foolish enough to try any game of that sort," the detective replied, evasively.

"But if he should?" the other persisted.

"It is not wise to cross bridges until we come to them," the man-hunter responded, with a quiet smile.

"I suppose a man in your line of business would be justified in killing a prisoner if he saw that the fellow could not be prevented from escaping by any other means?"

"That is a legal point which only lawyers and judges can settle," the detective replied, dryly.

"I see that you are not inclined to commit yourself."

"Oh, well, you are asking a hard question," the other answered. "And then circumstances alter cases, you know. In such a matter you cannot lay down any cast-iron rule. What a man would do depends altogether on the way the thing is going. The course of action which would do in one case would not in another."

Young Peterkin was silent for a few moments, evidently meditating upon the matter.

"I think that if I were a detective and ordered to arrest a man that I would be apt to bag my game even if I had to use powder and ball to do it!" he said, decidedly.

"Ah, yes, but you are not a detective, and if you were you might think differently," the detective remarked, in his dry way.

At this point the conversation ended and nothing more was said for a good half-hour, then young Peterkin, growing impatient, looked at his watch.

"It is after half-past ten!" he exclaimed. "It seems to me that the examination ought to be finished by this time. It was my father's opinion that it would not take over a couple of hours, and now they have been at it for three hours and a-half."

"Yes, it is a long time."

"Do you not think we had better make an examination?" the young man asked, beginning to get nervous.

"Perhaps it would be as well."

"We can go quietly, and if they are engaged in conversation we will be able to distinguish the fact."

The detective nodded.

Leaving their post the pair proceeded to the broker's office, moving with great caution.

They listened at the door of the outer office and as no sound came from within they made bold to enter.

This afforded the man concealed behind the outer door an opportunity to escape, of which he was not slow to avail himself.

When the pair were within the office they stole on tip-toe to the door of the private room and listened for a few moments.

"I do not hear a sound," young Peterkin observed.

"No, they are evidently not engaged in conversation."

Then the son stooped and peered through the keyhole, and as the key was turned sideways he was able to get a view of the table.

"I cannot see any one," he whispered.

"That is very strange," the detective commented. "The key is on the inside; suppose you knock; you can feign some excuse, if everything is all right, for your coming."

"Yes, I will do so."

"And I will keep out of sight."

The young man knocked, gently. No response was made and the detective shook his head.

"This looks as if something was wrong," he remarked. "Knock again and loudly."

Milton Peterkin obeyed, but no more answer was made to the second knock than to the first.

"Can it be possible that there has been a quarrel and that they have killed each other?" the young man exclaimed.

"Not likely," the detective replied. "But something is evidently wrong, and if you say so I will burst open the door, for it seems to be a slight affair."

"Yes, it is nothing but a common cheap lock."

"Shall I go ahead?"

"Do so!"

The door opened inward so that it was an easy matter for the detective with a single vigorous kick to burst open the door.

A cry of horror escaped from the lips of the young man as he beheld the form of his father prostrate upon the floor.

He knelt by his side, and when he discovered that life had fled, became almost prostrate with grief.

The detective was prompt to act.

"The murderer cannot have many minutes start and we ought to be able to nab him!" he exclaimed.

Warning was at once given to the officer on post, and the electric wire soon carried the news to Headquarters, and from the Central Office instructions were immediately sent out looking to the apprehension of the fugitive.

Every policeman in the city was warned and all avenues of escape guarded.

It did not seem possible that the guilty man would manage to escape, but he did though, for no trace was obtained of him, despite the most persistent search.

By the death of the elder Peterkin, Milton, the son, became a wealthy man, and in order to show the world how much he loved the father whom he had lost in so cruel a manner, he proclaimed that he would hunt down the murderer of his sire if it cost him half his fortune.

He visited Police Headquarters and had an interview with the superintendent.

His object was to engage the detective who had been with him on the night of the murder to track the doer of the deed.

"I have taken a great fancy to this Mr.

Serene," he said. "And I believe that he can secure the criminal if any man can."

The chief thought so too and an arrangement with the detective was soon made.

That night the detective took a fast train to the West, for it was the belief of the chief that the murderer had fled in that direction.

## CHAPTER III.

### CHAMPAGNE BILLY.

AND now we will take the reader from the busy haunts of men in the great metropolis to the broad plains of Wyoming Territory.

Along the trail which led to the Sand Creek settlement in Sweetwater county rode a solitary traveler, mounted on a sorry-looking Indian pony.

He was a youngish man, about the medium size, well-built, and tolerably good-looking, although the rough, scrubby beard which completely covered the lower part of his face, did not add to his personal appearance.

He was poorly dressed, wearing the usual woolen garments common to the frontier, with the high boots and broad-brimmed hat of the cowboy, and the stout leather belt which girded in his supple waist supported the cow-puncher's usual outfit, two revolvers and a bowie-knife.

The trail went through a little grove of shaded trees.

Under the shade of the trees sat a stout, weather-beaten man of fifty, or thereabouts, dressed a little better than the common run of men as they are met on the Wyoming plains, as he sported a dark business suit, somewhat the worse for wear, it is true, but still looking quite respectable.

The big cowboy's hat ornamented his head though, and from under the skirts of his coat peeped the butts of two revolvers.

A good-looking horse was tied by a lariat to one of the trees, and he nibbled the grass in his neighborhood while his master proceeded to dispatch a lunch which he had taken from one of his saddle-bags.

The man looked up as the new-comer came along and greeted him with a cheerful:

"How'd'y!"

"Pretty well, I thank you; how are you?"

"Able to be around and to tackle three square meals a day, when I am lucky enough to get a chance at them," the other replied.

"Am I on the right trail for Sand Creek?"

"You bet!"

"How far is it?"

"Nigh onto ten or twelve miles, I reckon, or thereabouts."

"Is it as far as that?" the horseman asked in surprise.

"I reckon it is. Are you bound for Sand Creek?"

"Yes, I am out of a job and I thought I might get a chance to work on some of the ranches around there."

"In the cowboy line?"

"Yes."

"Well, I reckon you kin git a job without any trouble, for thar is always room for a good man on 'most any of the ranches. I am going to Sand Creek myself, although I don't reckon to stop thar long for this hyer new town of Bessemer is the pint I am aiming for."

"I have heard of the place and understand that it is the liveliest town of its size in the Territory."

"That is the lay-out, I reckon, stranger. I have never been thar, but that is the say-so that I have heered. S'pose you git off yer hoss and try a bite with me, and then we kin go on together."

"All right, I shall be glad to do so."

And then the horseman dismounted, tied his steed to a tree and took a seat on the grass by the side of the other, who divided his eatables into two parts and invited the horseman to help himself, after which he produced a flask, took a good pull at it and passed it over to the new-comer.

"Drink hearty!" he exclaimed. "You will find that to be as good a bit of p'ison as you will be likely to strike in Wyoming."

"Much obliged! here's luck!" and the horseman took a draught of the liquor, then he handed the flask back to the hospitable stranger, and commenced upon the eatables.

"How may I call yer handle, pard?" the other asked.

"My name is Haverill—Thomas Haverill," the horseman replied.

"Well, that is a good name, although I don't remember to have struck it afore."

"No, it is not a common name; I am of English decent."

"Yes, I see; well, my name is Billy Hudson, but I reckon that a heap of people who know me like a book wouldn't be able to savvy a chap 'bout my size if you inquired for Mister Billy Hudson, but if you axed 'em if they knew Champagne Billy they would tumble to me right away."

"Yes, I understand; it very often happens, particularly in this country, that a man gets a nickname by which he is far better known than by his own right name."

"Now you are talking, and no mistake! You see the fact is I am a sport and when I am playing in big luck, champagne is the only tippie



that I care to drink, and that is how I came to get the name."

"I see."

"And for a man in my line of business it is a first rate handle too."

"So I should judge."

"Luck ain't been running my way lately and so I thought I would try this new town of Bessemer; there is allers more chances for a man in my line in these new towns than in the old ones."

"Yes, I should imagine so."

"A new town is allers full of speculators—men with money who are ready for business, and then I am told that Bessemer is a great headquarters for all the cowboys in the neighborhood, and as the country round about the town is filled with ranches, there is always a lot of cow-punchers in the town."

"It would seem to be a good point for your business then, and also for mine."

"Yes, I reckon both of us stand a good chance to do well. Is thar any particular ranch that you think of striking?" Champagne Billy inquired.

"The XL Ranch is the one I am heading for."

"You don't say so!" the other exclaimed.

"Why, that is Cattle Kate's ranch!"

"Mrs. Maxwell, you mean?"

"Yes, but people round hyer don't Mrs. Maxwell her much except to her face. It is Cattle Kate, 'cept when she is present, and then it is Mrs. Maxwell, for it would not be healthy for any man to call her Cattle Kate to her face."

"She would be apt to resent it, eh?"

"You kin bet high she would, for she is the kind of woman who does not stand any nonsense and don't allow no familiarities."

"I understood that she is able to take care of herself."

"You had better believe that she can!" the other declared, emphatically. "She is as handy with a six-shooter as any man in the Territory, and she not only knows how to use her weapons, but she isn't afraid to do it, too."

"I remember at a round-up once, a Greaser, thinking that because she was a woman he could afford to be a little sassy, tried a little chin-music on her, and the way she whipped out her gun and put a leaden pill into the Mexican was a caution."

"I have heard the story; she killed the man, I believe?"

"You bet! and the universal verdict was, served him right. And then another time, one of her own cowboys, a fresh young rooster, called her Katie, and she soon showed him what was what by putting a bullet in his arm, to teach him manners, so she said. She could just as well put it through his heart; you know; and since that time none of her men have tried any gum-games with her."

"A regular Amazon."

"That is about the size of it," the old sport replied. "As it happens, I know all about the woman, and I don't believe thar's a man in the Territory who can tell you any more about her than I can," he continued. "I was in Chicago with Maxwell at the time he picked her up."

"Maxwell had gone to Chicago to sell a bunch of cattle, and after he got his money he proceeded to 'do' the town. I had gone to Chicago from Laramie—I was located there then, running a game—and happened to meet Maxwell, who was an old friend of mine."

"This woman was then singing in one of the variety shows, and that is how Maxwell met her. He became infatuated right away, and the first thing I knew the pair were married. Then he brought her out hyer to his ranch."

"It was something of a change, from the stage of the variety theater to the wild life of a ranch," the other observed.

"Yes, but she took to the life from the first. Kate is as plucky a woman as I ever met. She learned to ride, and to shoot, and to handle the lasso as well as any cowboy that ever backed a horse, and when Maxwell died a year or so ago, she kept right on and run the ranch just about as well as he ever did."

"Yes, I understand she has been quite successful."

"But I reckon that she will git into trouble one of these days if she is not careful."

"How so?"

"Well, it is the opinion of a good many of the ranchers up in her neighborhood that she has been rustling—you undersand what that means?"

"Yes, altering the brand on cattle—stealing beeves in fact."

"That is it. Well, her neighbors have got it into their heads that she has a good many more cattle than she ever raised, and quite a number of them do not hesitate to say openly that her ranch is the headquarters for the biggest gang of rustlers that the Territory has ever known, and that if she don't put a stop to the thieving of her men one of these days there will be music in the air."

"Don't these reports arise more out of jealousy because the woman has been successful than anything else?" Haverill asked, shrewdly.

"Oh, I do not doubt that jealousy has got something to do with it," the sport replied.

"But, then, it is a fact that she has an awful tough gang of men on her place. The XL Ranch

is the headquarters for all sorts of sports. There is cock-fighting, dog-fighting, sparring-matches, hoss-racing, foot-racing, and all sorts of rackets, going on all the time, and when a man up in this region is banking after a leetle excitement he kin 'most allers git it by making a bee-line for Cattle Kate's place."

"Of course such goings on are apt to give a ranch a bad name."

"Yes, the woman and her men are all fond of sport, but from what I have heard, I don't believe she and her cowboys are as bad as some folks try to make out."

"All men are liars, according to Solomon, and as he was a wise man he ought to know; I presume that in this case it is a good deal like the old saying of give a dog a bad name and then hang him."

"I reckon that it is about so. As I was saying I reckoned to stop at Sand Creek awhile for I thought thar might be a chance for me to pick up a few dollars."

"Well, from what you have said I should think there would be a show for you."

"Not in the gambling line though," the sport added, quickly. "Cattle Kate will not have anything of that kind going on in her place. She draws the line at card-playing. Her men can go off the ranch—go to Bessemer, or anywhere else, they like, and gamble all they please but they are not allowed to do it at home."

"I should think some of the cowboys would be apt to kick at that."

"They kin kick and be hanged for all that Cattle Kate cares," the old sport replied. "That is one of her rules and if a man don't like it he kin quit and hunt another job as soon as he likes."

"Yes, I see; but how do you calculate to make a raise at Sand Creek if this Cattle Queen will not allow any gambling? I should not think there would be any opening for you at all."

"Oh, yes, thar is, a big opening! Did you ever hear of Old Washakie, the Shoshone Indian chief?"

"Yes, I think I have heard his name mentioned, but I do not know anything about him."

"Well, pard, he is the smartest old red devil that ever put a foot in a moccasin. He is the big chief of the Shoshone tribe and with a lot of his young men is in the Government service—Government scouts, you know."

The other nodded.

"The old red cuss is a born gambler and never loses a chance to take a trick. He has got two or three young bucks in his tribe who kin outrun any thing in the Territory, and as some of Cattle Kate's cowboys think that they are some on the run too, the old red chief has managed to skin the XL Ranch people out of a good many ducats. Now I heard that Old Washakie had started for Cattle Kate's place with the idea of bluffing them into a race, and as the Cattle Queen has got a lot of fresh cowboys since the time when the last race took place, and some ov 'em has been blowing around pretty lively 'bout how fast they kin run, it is pretty sart'in that the old red buck will be accommodated with a race."

"And Cattle Kate can be depended upon to back her men, I suppose," the other observed, thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes, you bet! She is jest that plucky, although the red bucks have won all the races heretofore."

"How do you propose to bet?"

"On the red-skins every time!" the old sport answered, decidedly.

"But don't you suppose that there is a chance that the cowboys may succeed in beating the reds some time?"

"Nary chance!" the other declared. "These copper-colored bucks are jest old lightning on the run, and I reckon that nobody but a professional runner stands any show with them."

"What distance is usually run?"

"Quarter mile dash—an eight of a mile out, turn a post and back to the starting-point."

"How fast can the red-skins run—can they do the quarter in anything like sixty seconds?" Haverill asked in a way that showed he was taking a deep interest in the subject.

The old sport looked at the other in astonishment.

"Say! I reckon that you have never seen any foot-racing in this hyer country."

The other admitted that this was a fact.

"Well, we don't never bother ourselves with any such extra fine work as timing the men. We start 'em off at the crack of a pistol and the galoot who gits back to the starting-place first takes the ducats."

"Then you have no idea how fast these red-skins can run—that is how many seconds or minutes it takes them to cover the distance?"

"No, you are too much for me thar, but I reckon that thar ain't one of 'em that kin do it in anything better than a minute; over would be a deal more like it to my thinking."

"If a man cannot run a quarter in close to fifty seconds he is not anywhere near being in championship form."

The old sport surveyed his companion for a moment, a speculating look in his keen, gray eyes, and then he remarked:

"It 'pears to me that you are talking like a man who knows something about this hyer thing."

"Well, I think I do; I have always taken a great interest in athletic matters."

The old sport now took a look at the other's muscular proportions.

"Seems to me that you are kinder built on the greyhound style," he observed, with the air of a judge. "Maybe you are something of a runner yourself."

"Well, a few years ago I was counted to be pretty good on the cinder-path, and if your red bucks cannot cover a quarter of a mile in less than sixty seconds, I think I am a match for them."

"By Jinks! if you are, old man, and can get backing, you can win everything the Injuns have got outside of their red hides!" the sport exclaimed.

"As to that, of course, I cannot say; but I presume that if I can satisfy the Cattle Queen that I am a good man, she will be glad to back me."

"You bet! and, if you like, I will introduce you to her and put in a good word."

"I shall be much obliged if you will."

"Come on, then; let's be going!"

A couple of minutes later they were in the saddle.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### CATTLE KATE.

KATE MAXWELL, the Cattle Queen, the mistress of the XL Ranch, was a woman of thirty or thereabouts.

She was tall and well-formed, good-looking, with the blackest of eyes and hair, but her beauty was a little marred by a scar on her chin.

She was seated in the office of the ranch reading a newspaper when the old sport and his companion were conducted to her presence.

The Cattle Queen was handsomely dressed, and her person was profusely decorated with jewelry, just as though she was residing in the midst of civilization instead of on a lonely ranch in the very heart of the wild West.

"I hope I see you well, Mrs. Maxwell," the old sport remarked, with a polite bow, as he entered the lady's presence.

"Oh, yes, I have nothing to complain of," she replied, casting a curious glance at the young man.

"Allow me to introduce a pard of mine," Champagne Billy observed. "Mr. Thomas Haverill, Mrs. Maxwell."

Haverill bowed and the Cattle Queen returned the salutation.

"This pard of mine was thinking that thar might be a chance for him to get a job on your place," the old sport explained.

"Are you a cowboy?" the Cattle Queen asked, with a searching glance at Haverill.

"Yes, although I cannot boast of being an old and experienced one; still I have spent some time at cow-punching, and so am not altogether a greenhorn," Haverill replied.

"Well, I will give you a trial," the Cattle Queen remarked, carelessly. "On a ranch like mine there is always room for one more man."

"Like an omnibus, it is never full, eh, Mrs. Maxwell?" the old sport remarked.

"Yes, that is about the idea; but what brings you up this way, Champagne?" the Amazon questioned. "Did you come to see this old red buck walk off with our valuables as he has done for the past two years?"

"Yes, I came to see the races, and I thought that there might be a chance for me to pick up a few ducats," she sport replied. "I understand that a couple of your cowboys are jest old lightning on the run."

"So they assert, but I have about got tired of backing my men, for when they come to run against the red-skins, they do not seem to stand any chance."

"This pard of mine hyer is well posted on foot-racing," Champagne Billy observed. "He goes in on the scientific lay—runs by the watch, you know."

"Well, that is the proper way, of course," the Cattle Queen remarked, surveying Haverill with a glance which plainly indicated the interest which she took in the matter.

"Yes, if the men are timed it is an easy matter to draw comparisons between them, even if they have never run against each other," Haverill said.

"That is very true," the woman observed, thoughtfully. "Are you posted in regard to the time in which a quarter of a mile ought to be run?"

"Yes, I know what the figures are."

The Cattle Queen surveyed the pair for a moment with a searching glance, and then she said:

"Champagne, I know you of old—you are business from the word go, and I fancy that you haven't come to see me to-day for the pleasure of saying 'how are you?'"

The old sport grinned.

"I reckon you are about right thar," he admitted. "The fact is, when this hyer pard of mine let on to me that he was something of a runner, the idee came to me that maybe we



could put up a job to skin Old Washakie out of his wealth. The red buck has so much faith in his young men that he will bet everything he has in the world on them."

"Yes, it is his belief that the white man doesn't live who can beat his best runner," the Cattle Queen observed.

"That is White Deer?" said Champagne Billy.

"The same; and I must say that the old chief has reason for the faith that is in him, for White Deer so far has easily beaten every man who has run against him."

"It is a pity that you have never timed the Indian, for if I knew how long it took him to run the quarter, I could tell immediately what chance I stand of beating him," Haverill remarked.

"My pard hyer was axing if the red-skin could do the distance in less than a minute, and I reckoned that he couldn't," Champagne Billy observed.

"I do not think he can run it in less than a minute," the Cattle Queen declared.

"A first-class man can cover the distance pretty close to fifty seconds," Haverill remarked. "And I have done it in fifty-five, and without previous training, too, but then I am one of the kind of men who are always ready, for I am always in condition."

"If you can run a quarter of a mile in fifty-five seconds, you can easily beat any runner that the old red chief has in his tribe!" Cattle Kate exclaimed in a tone of conviction. "Don't you think so, Champagne?"

"That is my opinion, and that is what I told my pard hyer when he talked with me about the matter," the old sport replied.

"Champagne, I am going to be honest with you!" the Cattle Queen observed, abruptly. "I suppose that this talk of yours is all square, but how can I be sure that it is? How can I be certain that you are not trying to arrange a scheme to fleece me of some of my wealth?"

Haverill shook his head, and the old sport laughed.

"That is like you, Mrs. Maxwell," Champagne Billy remarked. "You always have your eyes open, and I reckon that the man who gets ahead of you will have to get up pretty early in the morning."

"As far as I am concerned, as I am a total stranger to you, it is only natural that you should have doubts in regard to me," Haverill remarked. "And I do not at all wonder at it. But you must consider these facts: why should I wish to deceive you, when I can make more by acting honestly with you? I am a stranger, with very little money, and I need work. If I can satisfy you that I am a good man—one who can be trusted, you will undoubtedly make a place for me here on your ranch."

"Oh, yes, I need just such a man as you are," the Cattle Queen replied, immediately. "I can see that you are educated, and, I judge, used to conducting business. Common cowboys I can get by the hundred, but a man like yourself, who is capable of taking command, does not come along every day."

"That is true, and, as I said, there is every reason in the world why I should keep faith with you," Haverill urged.

"Now, in regard to this racing matter," he continued. "I understand that old Washakie is on the ground with his red bucks, ready for a run."

The Cattle Queen nodded assent.

"Suppose, then, that you make up a race for to-morrow, let your two cowboys run against his men, and you can bet just enough on them so that the old buck will not suspect that you have little hope of their winning," Haverill suggested. "You can time the runners so as to see exactly how long it takes them. If the race is not run better than fifty-five, I will stand a good chance of winning, and the moment you see what the time is, and you judge I can win, you can challenge the red-skins to another race on the following day, saying that you have another man whom you think able to clean out his red-skins. Then, at night, I will run a trial race for you on the quiet, when everybody is abed and asleep, so that you can be satisfied in regard to what I can do. You can time me, and if I don't cover the distance in fifty-five, or better, you need not back me."

"It seems to me, Mrs. Maxwell, that this hyer is all straight," the old sport observed. "You will be betting on a pretty sure thing, and will stand a good chance of winning everything the red-skins have, for I will do the heathen bucks the justice to say that when they think they have got a good thing, they do not hesitate to bet all they kin raise on it."

The Cattle Queen reflected over the matter for a few moments, and then said:

"Very well; it is a bargain. I believe that you are both disposed to act squarely, and if everything goes all right, we stand a chance to win a large amount, for not only will the red-skins bet all they have on their champion, but the majority of the ranchers will back the red bucks, for it is the general impression that no white man stands any show with them."

"The more there is that hold to that opinion the better it will be for us," Champagne Billy observed, with a chuckle. "And it is our

leetle game to get hold of all the wealth that we kin."

The Cattle Queen coincided in this and then invited the pair to take up their quarters with her.

"I will engage you for a cowboy, Haverill, and put you with the rest of the men so that no one will have any suspicions when I produce you to run."

The others thought that this was a good idea; then the old sport remarked that he reckoned he would go down to the town and see how things were running.

"You will find it a pretty lively place, I imagine," Cattle Kate remarked. "The races always draw a big crowd, particularly when Old Washakie puts up his red bucks to run."

"The bigger the crowd the better I like it," Champagne Billy remarked. "When there is a big mob there is always a chance for a man like myself to pick up a few ducats."

The woman nodded assent and the old sport took his departure.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE STRANGE SHARP.

It was as the Cattle Queen had said.

Sand Creek was a small settlement, but the fact that the races were to take place there had filled the town to overflowing.

Ranchers, cowboys, sports of every degree, and about thirty Indians of Old Washakie's band, had congregated in the town.

A man in search of sport could hardly fail to find what he wanted.

Champagne Billy soon discovered that nine out of every ten men had come prepared to bet on the red-skins, and this fact did not please the Shoshone chief, Old Washakie, at all.

He was anxious to back his young men but found few willing to bet against the red bucks.

"White men a heap 'fraid!" he sneered. "All say Injun can't run, but their money don't say so. White men got no sand, bah!"

It was little wonder the old chief was disgusted with the betting all one way.

Champagne Billy chuckled to himself.

"My goodness!" he exclaimed. "If that pard of mine can do the trick, nine-tenths of this crowd will have to walk home for they will not have any horses to carry them."

One enterprising genius had brought along a tent and started a faro game which was well patronized. Champagne Billy soon found his way to this place.

The proprietor of the establishment was an old acquaintance, a Cheyenne man who was known as Square Dave Green.

The appellation of "square" had been affixed to his name because it was his boast that he played a perfectly fair game, and this statement was generally believed by all who were acquainted with the sport and the way he conducted his business.

"I am satisfied with the regular percentage of advantage that the game has against the players, and I don't go in to rob anybody!" he was wont to declare. "A child or a blind man stands just as good a show at my table as the smartest player that ever put up a check, as far as fair treatment is concerned."

As Champagne Billy sauntered into the tent he jostled elbows with a young man who happened to turn abruptly in his direction.

The old sport, who prided himself upon his politeness, hastened to assure the young man that he did not mean to jostle him, and so the two got into conversation.

The other was a little below the medium size, but possessed a well-knit and muscular form. He was a good-looking young fellow, with a frank, open face, smoothly-shaven and effeminate. His eyes were a peculiar gray, very deep and searching in their expression, and his head was covered with a mass of flaxen hair, which curled in little crispy ringlets all over his head.

"Don't mention the matter," the young man said, in reply to the old sport's explanation. "Any man that knows Champagne Billy is aware that he never goes out of his way to give offense."

The old sport was surprised to hear the other pronounce his name, and he took a good look at him.

"I reckon, stranger, that you have got a leetle the advantage of me," he said. "You have got my handle pat enough, but I will be hanged if I can catch on to yours."

"My name is Silver—Ben Silver, though from the fact that I make a living by the use of the pasteboards, and wear these little silver buttons on my coat, I am often called the Silver Sharp."

The young man wore pantaloons and coat of black corduroy, with high riding-boots and a fawn-colored broad-brimmed hat. A dark-blue flannel shirt covered his breast, ornamented with a flowing collar, around which a black silk necktie was carelessly knotted.

It was a rather dandified rig, but cowboys, when flush with cash, are apt to indulge in just such clothes.

The only thing out of the way about the young man's dress, and which would be apt to excite attention, was the peculiar little silver buttons

which he had mentioned, and which ornamented the coat.

"The Silver Sharp is a good name to tie to, and I am proud to know you," the old sport remarked, shaking hands with the young stranger in the most cordial manner. "But I must say that I don't remember ever having run across you before."

"I met you at Denver about ten years ago," the other explained. "I was only a boy at the time, so it isn't any wonder that you do not remember me."

"Ah, yes, I see. Well, I thought it strange that I did not remember you, for I am death on faces and names."

"Under the circumstances, though, it is not odd that you did not remember me, for ten years have made a wonderful difference in my appearance, although very little in yours."

"I reckon that you are about right thar!" the old sport observed, with a satisfied grin. "People who have known me for the last twenty years declared that I haven't changed much in that time, but then you see I take mighty good care of myself."

"Are you going to try a whack at the game?" the Silver Sharp asked.

"No, although I swow I would like to," the other replied, with a longing look at the table whereon the seductive pasteboards were displayed. "But I am saving my ducats to bet on the races."

"Perhaps I can give you a tip there."

"I would be glad if you would!" the old sport exclaimed, with well simulated eagerness.

"Well, I am told that this Shoshone Indian, White Deer, can clean out anything in the Territory when it comes to foot-racing."

"He is the chap I want to put my money on, then."

"Yes; but the trouble is that everybody wants to bet on him, and few care to bet against him," the Silver Sharp responded.

"Then there will not be much chance for speculation."

"Not much, and I am going to try my luck at Square Dave's game."

"Well, I will watch the way the thing runs for a while, and maybe I will try a stake or two."

The two sauntered up to the table, and the Silver Sharp purchased twenty-five dollars' worth of 'chips,' which he immediately proceeded to bet, displaying such a knowledge of the game that it was plain he was an old hand at the business.

Luck favored the young man, for after losing a couple of small bets, he won a big stake, but as he put out his hand to remove the chips, an overgrown, ugly-looking fellow, who had edged in by the side of the Silver Sharp, put out his dirty hand and grabbed the stake.

"I know'd I would win when I bet that time!" he cried.

This was an old game, and one often successfully played, particularly in the wild West.

A big ruffian, taking advantage of his size, will get by the side of some quiet-looking man who is playing a successful game, and seize upon a favorable opportunity to claim the money upon the board.

The Silver Sharp was not at all taken by surprise.

He had noticed the big fellow edging in by his side and had suspected his game, and so the instant the ruffian seized the stake he out with his bowie-knife and hit the hand which had grasped the chips a rap across the knuckles with the back of the blade which made the ruffian howl with pain.

The blow forced the fellow to drop the chips, and then with his left hand the Silver Sharp gave the bully a poke in the stomach which doubled him up like a jack-knife.

All was confusion in an instant.

That the man was not alone was soon apparent, for a couple of fellows, fully as evil-looking as the big bully, came forward to the assistance of the discomfited man.

Seeing that there was going to be trouble, Square Dave was prompt to act.

He whipped out a revolver, all ready cocked for action, and cried:

"Go easy now, gentlemen—I cannot allow any disturbance in hyer! The first man who makes a movement to draw a weapon I will send to kingdom come so quickly that he will never know what hurt him until St. Peter explains the matter to him at the gate and tells him that his baggage is checked for the lower regions!"

This put an immediate stop to the advance of the bully's friends.

In a few moments the big ruffian recovered from the effect of the blow he had received, and his rage was great.

"See hyer, I ain't a-going to stand no sich treatment as this hyer," he declared. "That stake was mine, and I am going for to have it, too!"

"Oh, no; your eyes deceived you!" Square Dave replied. "It was this gentleman's bet," and he indicated the Silver Sharp with a nod.

"Is this the sort of treatment you ar' going to give me, Square Dave?" the bully demanded.

"Arter all the money that I have lost at your table, too. Why, I would not have believed it,



but I am in for satisfaction, you bet! I reckon you don't know who I am!" and he glared at the Silver Sharp as he spoke.

"Oh, yes, I do; you are a big rascal who takes advantage of his size to terrify men smaller than himself," the young man replied, promptly. "But you made a mistake this time, if you picked me up for a flat who could be bullied out of his money, for I will not have it!"

"You slab-sided galoot! if I took hold of you once, I'd break you in two!" the big fellow cried, angrily. "I reckon you don't know that you are bucking up ag'in' a living airthquake when you tackle me. I'm Tim Johnson, the old He Wolf from Laramie, and when I git a-going I'm a reg'lar tornado!"

"More of a jackass about you than a wolf!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed, contemptuously. "Any one could tell that by your bray. And now, if you want satisfaction, just come outside and see if I don't give it to you!"

"That is right—that is the way to talk!" Square Dave exclaimed, approvingly. "Don't go to have any trouble in hyer, whar thar isn't any room for fun anyway, and you only disturb other people; but go outside, where you can fight over forty acres if you like."

The promptness of the Silver Sharp's challenge rather astonished the big fellow, and he took a good look at the young man as if to make sure that he had not made some mistake about him.

"Do you mean to say that you dar' to stand up ag'in' me in a fair, squar' fight?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir, that is my platform, and if I don't succeed in giving you all you want, then I am not as good a man as I think I am," the young man replied, promptly.

"Why, you Jack-a-dandy, you don't stand no more show if I once git arter you than a chippy would in the claws of an eagle," the big fellow declared, in supreme contempt.

"Say, as you are going into Natural History, let me ask you a question: did you ever see a king bird whip a crow?"

There were plenty of men in the crowd who had witnessed this performance and the speech caused a general laugh.

This served to increase the rage of the He Wolf of Laramie.

"Never you mind your king bird and crow business!" he exclaimed. "Jest you come outside and give me a chance to hammer you!"

"Now you are talking, sir, and I am your man!" the Silver Sharp declared. "Have the kindness to cash these chips, please," he said to the proprietor of the game.

Square Dave complied, the young man put the money in his pocket, then, turning to the big fellow, said:

"Go ahead! I am your antelope, and if I don't tan your hide for you in a truly scientific manner it will be because you are a better man than I think you are!"

"You've done blowing ernuff—come down to solid biz!" the bully exclaimed, and then he marched from the tent.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE HE WOLF IS SURPRISED.

THE altercation had attracted considerable attention, for Tim Johnson, the He Wolf from Laramie, as he delighted to term himself, was a well-known character.

He was one of the class, so common in the new towns of the wild West, who prided himself upon being a "bad man," and as he had a supreme contempt for "tenderfeet," as he always termed strangers from the East, he generally tried to pick a quarrel with them, particularly if the men happened to be smaller than himself and looked as if they were not accustomed to war.

Now, this stranger was a quiet-looking chap, and the moment that the bully set eyes upon him he had picked him out for a victim, and although the bold way in which the young man talked back to him created considerable astonishment in his mind yet he did not doubt that he would be able to gain an easy victory.

As he emerged into the open air he encountered an acquaintance, a chum, who bore the cognomen of Old Pete Bolivar, another "bad man," but who was not dangerous except when he was in liquor, then he craved blood, as he was wont to say.

When Old Pete beheld the He Wolf come stalking forth, his chin elevated and his head thrown back, he jumped immediately to the conclusion that there was trouble brewing.

"Hello, Tim, wot is up?" he questioned.

"Nothing much," the other replied with a contemptuous sniff. "Only a leetle contract which I have taken to lick the stuffin' out of a cheeky galoot who has got more sass to the square-inch than any man I have come across in a dog's age."

"Wa-al, I pity the rooster who is fool enuff to stack up ag'in' a man like you!" Old Pete exclaimed in a commiserating tone. "It is plain as the nose on a man's face that he ain't got no sense in his head, but you kin bet yer life that you will hammer some inter him if any man kin."

"I should smile!" the He Wolf exclaimed with a prodigious grin.

"Oh, let up on your chin-music!" the Silver Sharp cried, impatiently. "You fellows make me tired with your blowing! And don't make any mistake about this thing either. You cannot win this fight with any mouth-work. The walls are not going to fall down at the blast of a trumpet, no matter how big a horn you blow."

This speech made the bystanders grin; quite a crowd had collected; it is wonderful how soon in a case of this kind people gather around.

"You are talking mighty confident now, but I reckon you will sing a different tune arter I git a few cracks at you!" the bully declared.

"Don't kill him too quick," Old Pete suggested. "Cos it is some time since we have had a little scrap of this kind and we want to git the worth of our money."

"Don't you worry about that," the Silver Sharp remarked. "If you do not get more fun out of this thing than from any scrap you ever had in this town then I have made the biggest kind of a mistake."

The two bullies looked at each other; they were puzzled by this confident declaration, and did not know exactly what to make of it.

One thing they were sure of, and that was that no man in the town of the stranger's inches would dare to talk in this manner, and the only conclusion to which they could come, was that the stranger was a rash youth, who had not sense enough to understand the peril of his situation.

"You are by long odds the sassiest galoot that ever struck this hyer town!" Tim Johnson declared. "And it is a duty I owe to the citizens of this hyer burgh, to warn you so that your dearest friend won't be able to recognize you arter the opera is over."

"Oh, come now, get down to business!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed. "We have heard enough about what you can do and what you are going to do, so now go ahead and give us a practical illustration. For my part, I doubt your statements. I do not believe that you amount to shucks as a warrior, and I reckon I can lay you out, and not half try, either."

This confident declaration enraged the bully greatly, particularly as he observed a smile upon the faces of some of the bystanders.

"You want to be warmed hard, don't ye!" he cried. "Wa-al, now, you kin bet all the rocks that you kin scare up that you have come to the right shop! Put up yer fists and lemme massage yer!"

The big fellow advanced upon the Silver Sharp, brandishing his huge fists, while the spectators formed a ring around the two, all eager to witness the contest.

It looked to be a most unequal struggle, for the He Wolf was a much bigger man in every way than his opponent, but a good judge of this sort of thing would not have been so impressed, for the big fellow was badly put together, loose-jointed and clumsily-built, while the other was so perfectly formed, that he could have served as a model for a sculptor.

As the bully advanced, the Silver Sharp assumed an attitude which would have delighted the heart of a boxing-master.

His left foot was advanced, the body slightly thrown back, and the arms carried on a level with the middle of the chest.

The position somewhat bothered and surprised Johnson, for in all his contests he had never encountered anything of the kind before.

He was not much of a boxer, but knew enough about the manly art of self-defense to understand that it would not be an easy matter to "get at" a man who opposed such a perfect guard.

When he came up to the scratch, he hesitated for a moment, unce tain exactly how to proceed; it was his idea to make a rush and break down the guard, but he thought it would be best to spar for a few moments, so as to study the position.

The moment though that he came within reach, with wonderful quickness, the Silver Sharp led with his left at the He Wolf's head.

With the clumsiness of the unpracticed boxer, the big fellow threw up both hands to ward off the expected blow, but it was only a feint, and the moment that Johnson left his chest uncovered, his opponent dealt him a most terrible right-hander, the blow falling just below the heart, and the force of the shock was so great, that the big fellow fairly grunted with pain.

In all his boxing encounters he had never received such a blow before.

The effect lasted but a moment though, and then, hot with rage, the He Wolf rushed upon the Silver Sharp, striking out with all his strength, but in the most dextrous manner his nimble antagonist dodged under his arm, thus evading the blows without attempting to parry them, and then, when the other turned, wheeling around in a very clumsy manner to pursue the light-footed foe, the young man dealt him a crack under the ear with his iron-like right fist which fairly staggered the big fellow, and as he reeled back the Silver Sharp promptly followed up the advantage he had obtained.

Again the awful blow in the neighborhood of the heart was given, and then, as Johnson in-

voluntarily thrust his head forward, his antagonist smashed him between the eyes with his left fist, and over went the big fellow on his back.

The crowd yelled with delight. It had been many a long day since any of them had seen such a "circus," as one delighted cowboy termed the affray.

The He Wolf of Laramie was slow in getting upon his legs again, although assisted by Old Pete, who had hastened to his aid.

"Brace yourself!" Bolivar exclaimed. "Brace up and have some style about you! You mustn't let this tripping, low-down, no-account tender-foot get away with you!"

"Durn my cats if the cussed galoot can't hit 'bout as hard as a mule kin kick!" the big fellow observed, with a groan as he got on his feet.

"Go for him ag'in! Mebbe you will be able to lay him out on the second heat!" Old Pete suggested.

At this point one of the cowboys, anxious for the fun to go on, called out in a loud tone:

"Time!"

"Go for him and pound him inter hash!" urged Old Pete, patting his pard on the back in an encouraging way.

"Time!" yelled another one of the cowboys.

This irritated Johnson.

"I reckon that if you was a-playing fu'st fiddle in this hyer show, that you wouldn't be in sich a darned hurry!" he exclaimed, angrily.

This remark made the crowd laugh and the He Wolf was still more amazed.

"Thar ain't no call for any of you to haw-haw like a set of durned mules!" he exclaimed. "And I want you all to understand that I didn't go inter this picnic jest for the sake of making fun for a lot of durned idiots!"

This speech only served to amuse the bystanders still more, and almost every face in the crowd wore a broad grin.

"You are only talking so as to git yer wind!" yelled some one in the background, in derision.

"Who sed that?" cried the He Wolf, angrily, wheeling around—the words had come from some one in his rear.

"The man who sed that ar' thing don't dare to come out and give me a chance to smash him!" the big fellow declared.

This was true enough for the speaker was one who would not have dared to face the bully.

Johnson glared at the grinning crowd for a moment and then, with a savage look upon his face, directed his attention to his opponent.

He was a dull-minded brute and the way in which he had been handled by his nimble antagonist greatly perplexed him.

Although he had not succeeded in getting in a blow and his opponent had apparently been able to hit him when and where he liked, yet he had not yet come to the conclusion that he was no match for the man whom he had so wantonly provoked.

It did not seem to him that it could be possible he could not easily conquer a foe so much smaller than himself, and he tried to think that it was only by accident that the stranger had been able to get in such terrible blows, so he resolved to be cautious and not expose himself any more than he could help.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A PRESENTIMENT.

THE bully slowly approached the Silver Sharp who had assumed his former position, working his big fists up and down in windmill fashion. He had decided that his game this time was to close in with his opponent; if he could succeed in coming to close quarters he felt sure that his superior size and strength would give him a decided advantage.

He thought he had been careless, and he had made up his mind not to give a point away now.

But no sooner had he got within reach than his opponent promptly commenced operations by leading straight for his face with his right; in attempting to parry the blow the big fellow left his chest unguarded and as a result the Silver Sharp got in another terrible blow in the region of the heart which made the He Wolf wince with pain.

"You durned miserable galoot!" he yelled, "do you want to kill me?"

"Are we fighting in fun or earnest?" the other demanded.

"Wa-al, I reckon that it is in earnest," the bully replied.

"Then don't whimper like a whipped cur when you get a blow that hurts."

This excited the crowd and some of the men in the background commenced to jeer the bully.

Rendered furiously angry by this, Johnson forgot all about his resolutions in regard to caution and made a headlong rush at his opponent, striking out with both fists in the most desperate manner.

The blows, undoubtedly, would have damaged the Silver Sharp materially if any of them had reached him, but, to use the old saying, "his legs had been too well brought up to see his body abused," and so he lightly danced back out of reach; then, as the big fellow paused out of breath from his mighty exertions, for there isn't anything in this world that tires a man



more than that in hitting at the empty air, the Silver Sharp gave him another terrific dig in the chest which made Johnson grunt with pain and then he rapidly closed in with him.

The big fellow gave vent to an exclamation of joy, for this was exactly what he wanted and he fancied that now he would be able to do something, but in some mysterious way—Johnson was never able to understand exactly how it was done—his nimble antagonist twisted his legs off the ground and he came down to the earth with a violence which about knocked all the breath out of him.

The spectators yelled with delight, and one enthusiastic cowboy offered to bet ten dollars to a slap on the cheek that the stranger would win.

Despite the greatness of the odds no one cared to accept the offer.

After the display of the Silver Sharp's prowess there was hardly a man in the throng who thought the big fellow stood any chance.

Old Pete hastened to the assistance of the He Wolf.

"It was a slip, pard," he whispered, encouragingly in the ear of Johnson. "It is a dollar to a cent that he cannot do it ag'in if he tried a thousand times!"

"Mebbe not," the other gasped, as he rose slowly to his feet, thanks to the aid extended by his chum, for he was so shaken up by his fall that he would not have been able to get up without the assistance of the other.

The man was all out of breath when he got on his feet and was compelled to lean on the shoulder of Old Pete, but his opponent did not appear to be any the worse for the exertions he had made.

The bystanders ceased their shouting when the big fellow got on his legs again, for all were eager for more fun, and anxious to see the battle go on.

But in this they were doomed to be disappointed, for the He Wolf had got enough and he was prompt to make the fact public too.

"Fellow-citizens, I want you to understand that I am no fool, and when I run my head ag'in a stone wall I have got sense enough to know it!" he exclaimed. "Stranger, you ar' too much for me and I don't want no more of you in mine!"

"Well, I am satisfied if you are," the Silver Sharp responded. "I am not going 'round knocking chips off of men's shoulders, but I do not allow anybody to walk over me if I know it."

"You are right, pard, for a thousand ducats! and I was a blamed fool for trying to stack up ag'in' you!" the big fellow declared. "But I must say that you are the most deceiving galoot I ever struck," and Johnson shook his head in a bewildered way.

"You don't look as if you was cut out for a big chief, but I will be hanged if you can't hit harder than any man I ever run up ag'in, and I reckon that is saying a good deal, for I have met some mighty good men in my time. Wa-al, so-long, I've got to be going. Say! from the way it feels I reckon you have about cracked one of my ribs!" and then the big fellow marched off, followed by his pard, Old Pete.

The Silver Sharp turned upon his heel and re-entered the gambling tent, and the spectators dispersed.

The fight had taken place about fifty feet from a two-storied building, the largest in the settlement, which was the hotel, but like all establishments of the kind on the frontier, the place depended more upon the bar than anything else.

From one of the windows in the second story of the hotel Kate Maxwell had witnessed the encounter.

With her was the foreman of her ranch, Tom Payson, her confidential man of business, a tall, swarthy, thick-set fellow, who did not bear the best of reputations.

He had been a Chicago gambler, and after Mrs. Maxwell came to the ranch she induced her husband to send for Payson, saying that he was just the man to take charge of the business matters appertaining to the place.

Payson proved to be a good foreman and after Maxwell's death was given full control.

The pair had watched the contest with decided interest.

"Is it not wonderful that this stranger should be able to best a man like Johnson?" Cattle Kate exclaimed after the fight had ended.

"Oh, no, the man knows how to handle himself," Payson replied.

The foreman was an excellent judge of this sort of thing, being considerable of a boxer himself.

"It is the old story, you know, cultivated skill against brute strength."

"Yes, but this stranger is anything but a weak man, I should say," Cattle Kate remarked. "Judging from the way he knocked Johnson about he is much stronger than any one would suppose, to look at him."

"The fellow is finely built, I saw that right at the beginning," the foreman observed. "And when he put up his dukes I judged from the way he went about the business that he knew what he was about."

"The man looks like a sport," Cattle Kate said, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Yes, that is what he is undoubtedly."

"Attracted here by the races, I presume."

"Probably! Where the game is there will come the vultures."

"He is a stranger, I think."

"Yes, I do not remember to have ever seen him before."

"There is something odd and peculiar about this sport, to my notion."

"He is a little out of the common run, but then a good many of these sports affect a fanciful dress; it serves as a sort of advertisement, you know."

"Yes, undoubtedly, but I was not referring to his dress; it is his face that struck me."

"There is a kind of weak and womanish look about it," Payson observed.

"I suppose you will think that it is strange but I have got a notion into my head that this man is dangerous!" Mrs. Maxwell exclaimed, abruptly.

The foreman looked at Cattle Kate in surprise.

"Dangerous?" he questioned.

"Yes, dangerous to me."

"What a strange idea!"

"That is true enough, but I have got it all the same."

"I don't exactly understand!" Payson exclaimed, puzzled.

"Neither do I, but it is a sort of presentiment I suppose. Women are more apt to have such things, and more certain to pay attention to them than men."

"Yes, I presume that is true."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it. I cannot very well explain the matter; all I can say is that I have some way become impressed with the idea that this man is destined to be dangerous, and it is my opinion that I ought to take measures to prevent him doing any harm to me."

The foreman was surprised by the sober and earnest way in which the Cattle Queen spoke, and he could see that the matter had made a deep impression upon her.

"I don't exactly see how the man could possibly trouble you in any way," Payson remarked.

"I confess that I do not see myself; all I can say is that I have a presentiment which warns me that he is destined to be dangerous, and I am disposed to heed that presentiment."

"Well, if you feel that way I do not blame you."

"That is where your head is level," Cattle Kate remarked, approvingly. "I know that a great many people who are counted to be wise would laugh at such a thing as being mere idle superstition, and would not give any heed to it, but I am not one of that kind. I never had a presentiment in my life and refused to pay attention to the matter that I did not afterward bitterly regret it."

"Well, I don't know as I ever had many presentiments," the old-time sport remarked, in a reflective way. "But a belief in such things is like a belief in luck, and you will not find many men who ever depended upon the pasteboards for a living who do not go a big lot on luck. If luck is running your way, well and good—put up all the ducats you can get your hands on; but if you find that luck is against you, the quicker you draw out of the game the better it will be for your pocketbook."

"That is certainly true, and now about this man: I want you to bring him to me, for I desire to have a talk with him."

Payson looked surprised.

"That is the best way," she continued. "Then I can see what he is like, and, perhaps, be able to take measures to prevent him from doing me any harm."

"Well, come to think about it, the idea is a good one," the other admitted. "I will have him up here in a brace of shakes," and then he departed.

## CHAPTER VIII. PLAIN WORDS.

PAYSON found the Silver Sharp in the center of an admiring group in the gambling tent; his victory had made him the hero of the hour.

The big fellow, by his bullying ways, had made himself obnoxious to the most of the men present, and they were glad that a champion had arisen able to "get away" with the He Wolf of Laramie.

The stranger did not seem to be at all elated by his triumph, and was disposed to make light of the matter.

"The most of these so-called bad men are not half so dangerous as they try to make out," he said, in a quiet way. "Bragging is their principal stock in trade, and when they are boldly confronted by men who are anything like a match for them they usually weaken."

It was a few minutes before Payson got a chance to speak to the young man, for his admirers were anxious to have him celebrate his victory by taking a drink with each separate one of them; but the Silver Sharp declined, saying in the most decided manner that he was no

drinking man, and that the crowd must excuse him.

He would take a single glass of ale and would be pleased to have all in the place join him.

But the crowd would not hear to drinking at his expense, and Square Dave, perceiving an opportunity to "make himself solid" with the crowd, settled the dispute by announcing that he would stand treat.

After this Payson got a chance to speak to the stranger.

"Allow me to congratulate you upon the scientific way in which you handled that big ruffian," he said. "I am an old-time sport and have witnessed a good many boxing exhibitions, but I don't think I ever saw any better display of science in my life. I presume that you are an amateur, of course, for you don't look like a professional pugilist; but I must say that you are away up at the top of the heap."

"Yes, I have been reckoned to be a pretty good boxer," the young man replied, modestly.

"Well, I should say so!" Payson exclaimed. "In my opinion, you are about the best man that I ever saw put up his dukes for a fight, and I have seen about all the chaps in the boxing line, too, from the highest to the lowest. I lived in Chicago for years, you see, and in the Windy City they get the best the market affords."

"Oh, yes, of course."

"Allow me to introduce myself, by the way. My name is Tom Payson, and I am the superintendent of the XL Ranch, Mrs. Kate Maxwell's place."

"Glad to meet you, sir," and the Silver Sharp shook hands with Payson. "My handle is Ben Silver, but, as I am somewhat of a sport, I have acquired the nick-name of the Silver Sharp."

"That's a good name!" Payson commented.

"By the way, I suppose you have heard of Mrs. Maxwell, Cattle Kate, as she is sometimes termed."

"Oh, yes; she is quite a noted character."

"But you must not believe all the stories that you hear about her, you know," Payson hastened to say.

"Of course not; I can understand, without knowing much about the matter, that in such a case there is likely to be a deal of fiction stirring."

"Yes, when you come to know Mrs. Maxwell you will find that she is an extra fine woman, and not half as black as her enemies try to make her out. She has been so successful in running her ranch that it has made a good many people jealous, and they have done all they could to injure her."

"That is natural under the circumstances," the Silver Sharp remarked. "There are a good many men who would be apt to take it hard to have a woman beat them at the cattle business."

"There is where the shoe pinches!"

"I am not one of the kind who believes all that they hear; but I must admit that the yarns that I have heard in regard to Mrs. Maxwell have inspired in me quite a curiosity to see her."

"That wish can be easily gratified," Payson replied. "Mrs. Maxwell is over at the hotel now. She saw the fight between you and Johnson from the window, and as she is the kind of woman who takes an interest in that sort of thing, she was delighted at the way in which you handled yourself, and said she would like to know you."

"Well, really, I feel flattered," the Silver Sharp responded.

"If you will come over I will introduce you."

"I shall be glad to do so."

Payson conducted the other to the hotel, and after presenting him to Mrs. Maxwell made the excuse that some business required his attention, then departed.

He had guessed that Cattle Kate did not require any witnesses to the interview.

Mrs. Maxwell courteously invited the Silver Sharp to take a chair, and the two sat down by the window.

"I am a great lover of all athletic sports," Cattle Kate began, "and therefore I watched your battle with this great bully with intense interest. You know that women do not usually care for such things, but I am an exception to the rule, and there isn't anything that I admire as much as a good boxing contest, and I can assure you that I greatly enjoyed the splendid way in which you conducted yourself."

"I feel very much flattered, I am sure," the Silver Sharp responded, in his easy, careless way.

"And I must say, too, that I was quite astonished by the display you made," Mrs. Maxwell remarked. "When I first saw you I really felt sorry to think you had been drawn into a quarrel with such a man as Johnson, who is universally regarded as one of the most dangerous men in this section."

"Well, you see I am a stranger and knew nothing whatever about the man, so his reputation did not frighten me," the sport explained. "That often has a great deal to do with a man's success or failure in a matter of this kind, you know. If a man goes into a contest of this sort with a feeling that he stands no chance to win, it is apt to make him nervous so he cannot do as well as he might."

"From what I have seen of you I doubt very



much if you could be scared by any man's reputation, no matter how great it was!" Mrs. Maxwell declared.

"Well, I reckon that is about so," the Silver Sport admitted, with a smile. "I am not one of the kind to be scared by a shadow."

"But few to look at you would think so."

"Appearances are often deceptive."

"That is true. No one would be apt to pick you out for a man capable of whipping a great overgrown giant of a fellow like this He Wolf of Laramie."

"No doubt that is correct, and that is where this fellow got fooled so badly. He was in the mood to quarrel with some one, and picked me out as a victim because he did not think I would stand any chance to make a successful fight."

"Well, he can hardly be blamed for making such a mistake, for few would think so. Why, you have a regular womanish look to your face," and Mrs. Maxwell fixed her shrewd eyes intently upon the features of the other as she spoke.

The Silver Sharp laughed.

"Yes, my weak, effeminate face has deceived a great many."

"Ah, your face may be effeminate, but there is nothing weak about it to my thinking!" Mrs. Maxwell hastened to declare.

"Well, I am glad to hear you say so, but I have not met many who have held that opinion."

"They were not good judges then," the other declared.

"Now I am a woman and my face has often been declared to be hard and masculine and yet it is not half as strong as yours."

"Yes, but you must remember that what would be weak in a man would be considered strong in a woman."

"That is true enough, still I do not consider your face to be a weak one, but after all doesn't the old saying fit in here, 'handsome is as handsome does?'"

"I suppose so."

"And after your easy triumph over the He Wolf of Laramie to-day, few, I think, would be apt to regard you as being weak in any way."

"They would be likely to make a mistake if they did," the sport replied with a quiet smile.

"You are so different from the men that I usually meet that I am obliged to confess in the frankest manner the deep interest I take in you," Mrs. Maxwell observed in a coquettish way.

"I am glad to hear it," the young man replied, perfectly at his ease, not at all embarrassed by the statement. "It is pleasant for a man to hear such assurance from the lips of a woman like yourself."

"Now you are flattering me!"

"Oh, no, not at all!"

"I judge from your dress and general appearance that you are something of a sport."

"Yes, I suppose I am; a speculator or a sport as the occasion warrants."

"And the races have drawn you to Sand Creek?"

"Yes, partly, and then I had a curiosity to see what the country was like up this way."

"Is it your purpose to remain in this section—you must pardon my curiosity, for I am a woman, you know," she added with a charming smile.

"Oh, that is all right," the other replied.

"Well I do not think I shall stay long at Sand Creek for it is my idea that I can do better at this new town of Bessemer; still I cannot say for certain in regard to that. I am a bird of passage, you know, and liable to change my location at any moment."

"Yes, I see," and Mrs. Maxwell's face assumed a thoughtful look. Mr. Silver, I have taken a great fancy to you!" she declared, abruptly, after remaining silent for a few moments. "And I wish I could make some arrangements for you to take up your quarters on my ranch."

"Well, I have done a little in the cowboy line," the sport admitted after a pause, doing which he appeared to be thinking the matter over, but I will say, frankly, that I am no great shakes at that sort of thing, and the pay is not high enough to suit me. I can do far better with the pasteboards, and by speculating a little when I see a good chance."

"Oh, I did not mean to have you come to my ranch as a cowboy!" Mrs. Maxwell exclaimed.

"I know very well that such a life would not suit a man like yourself."

"But that is all that you have to offer, isn't it?" the other asked.

"Oh, no, my ranch is a large one, and being a woman I cannot look after matters as closely as ought to be done. I have a good superintendent it is true, Mr. Payson, who introduced you, but he really has more work than he can properly attend to, and my idea was to make a place for you as a sort of a foreman."

"Well, would not that interfere with Mr. Payson?" the Silver Sharp asked.

"Oh, no, I can arrange that matter all right," she replied, a slight frown contracting her brows. "I want you to understand that I am the boss on my ranch, and that my will is law."

"Ah, yes, I see, and if you choose to put me in as foreman, you would do so whether any of your men objected or not."

"Yes, that is it, exactly; but no one will dare to object openly. All of my men know me too well to try any game of that kind!" Cattle Kate declared, in an extremely significant manner.

"Well, I feel very much flattered by your offer, of course," the young man replied. "But I don't really believe that I can accept it."

Mrs. Maxwell looked disappointed.

"You see I have always been accustomed to being my own master, and I don't believe I would get along very well if I had to take orders from somebody else," the Silver Sharp explained.

"Oh, you need not worry yourself about that!" Cattle Kate hastened to say. "I will make the work easy for you, and I can afford to pay you a good salary."

The Silver Sharp hesitated for a moment before he replied, and the woman watched him with the eyes of a hawk.

"I certainly am very much obliged to you for this liberal offer, but I don't think I can accept," he said at last.

"And why not?" demanded Cattle Kate, bluntly. "Have you any reason besides the one that you have given?"

"Well now, really, that is what a lawyer would call a leading question!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed, with a laugh. "And now, to put question for question, why should you suppose that I have any other reason than the one which I have given you?"

"Oh, I feel certain that you have," Mrs. Maxwell answered, in the most decided manner. "I am doing you the justice to suppose that you are not the kind of man blind enough to refuse a good offer without reason."

"Yes, but I have given you one!" the Silver Sharp declared.

"Yes; but that reason is not strong enough," Cattle Kate replied, quickly. "I offer you a good chance, easy work and a good salary, and where you will, practically, be almost as much your own master as you are now. You will have all the opportunity to indulge in card-playing that any man can wish for, and as I feel sure that you know this as well as I do, your refusal of the offer convinces me that you have some other reasons which you are holding back, and I do not think that that is quite fair. It seems to me that you ought to be as equally frank as I have been."

"Yes, I suppose that is so," the other admitted. "But, Mrs. Maxwell, there is a reason why I should not be. If I should speak plainly my words might not be pleasant for you to hear."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, with a sigh which seemed to be of relief, "it is as I expected."

"As you expected?" the sport questioned.

"Yes, I am a woman, and no one ever accused me of being deficient in the shrewdness which pertains to my sex, and that shrewdness enabled me to see, the very moment that I set eyes upon you, that you were no common border sport. Now then, give me your reason, frankly, I beg of you, why you will not take a position on my ranch."

"Well, since you are so persistent about the matter I suppose I shall have to comply, but you must not blame me if my words are not palatable; remember, you insisted upon my speaking."

"Oh, that is all right—go on!" exclaimed the woman, impatiently.

"In the first place you must be aware that your ranch does not bear a good reputation. The XL is said to be the resort of more bad characters than any other ranch in the Territory."

"Bah! that kind of talk all comes from malice!" Mrs. Maxwell declared, angrily. "Because my late husband was fond of all sorts of athletic sports and encouraged them by permitting the games, races and such like to take place on our ranch, this accusation is made, but there is not a word of truth in it! My cowboys are neither better nor worse than the cowboys on the other ranches."

"There is no truth in the allegation then that they are a set of rustlers who take delight in stealing cattle from other ranches and putting the XL brand on them?"

Cattle Kate's face grew crimson with anger.

"Upon my word this is plain speaking indeed!" she cried.

"You urged me to speak."

"True but I did not dream that you would be quite so severe, but it is all a lie! And now I will tell you who you are! You are a detective employed by my enemies to make trouble for me, but I defy you! With all your skill you will not be able to bring any crime to my door!"

"Oh, the idea is absurd!" the other declared. "You are away off. No enemy of yours has employed me, and you can rest assured that no harm will come to you through me unless you set your men on to attack me, which I hope you will not do."

"I will not strike the first blow, but if war does come look out for yourself."

"I always calculate to do that," the sport replied in his quiet way. "And now that we

have come to an understanding, permit me to depart."

And after a ceremonious bow, he left the room.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE RACE.

THE morning of the day on which the first race was to take place broke bright and beautiful.

Sand Creek hardly knew itself, so great was the throng.

Every sport-loving man within a circuit of five hundred miles had come to the town, for the report had been widely spread that Cattle Kate had secured a couple of runners who would be able to show their heels to the red greyhounds of Old Washakie.

For a good five years, in fact, ever since the old chief had backed his young men to beat any white runner who dared run against them, the red-skins had carried every thing before them, and as the Shoshone chiefs were inveterate gamblers, and never hesitated to bet all they had in the world upon their man, the whites had lost heavily.

And now that the rumor had got abroad that Cattle Kate had secured two extra good runners the sports were in hopes that Old Washakie and his gang might be "cleaned out."

It was the anticipation of this which had caused such a gathering.

A great many professional sports, too, like Square Dave Green, thinking that there would be a chance for them to turn an honest penny, had set up establishments, and the man who was after sport must be hard to please indeed if he could not find amusement to his liking in Sand Creek just at present.

Mrs. Maxwell had her headquarters at the hotel, and almost every one of the leading sports took occasion to call upon the Cattle Queen for the purpose of paying his respects as soon as he arrived in town.

This was the apparent object of their visits; in reality, though, the sports went for the purpose of getting a "tip" in regard to the races, and when the seekers after knowledge gingerly approached the matter, most of them in an extremely roundabout way, Mrs. Maxwell answered in the frankest manner:

"Well, now, really, I don't know any more about the matter than you do!" she declared. "Old Washakie has got a new man this time, and from all I can learn he is an extra good one, and that is saying a great deal, too, for the old chief's men have always been too fast for our white boys. The men that I am going to back, John Longlegs and Jake Codingham, are both said to be good, but as I have never seen either of them run, I cannot say how fast they are, so you see I am just taking the chances."

This was not much information, but as it was all they could get, the sports had to be satisfied with it.

A course had been staked off on the prairie, and as it was as level as a floor, no one had reason to complain of the ground.

The race had been fixed for two in the afternoon, and when the hour arrived there was a goodly crowd on the spot.

The two cowboys who were to run against the Indian champion were strutting about amid a crowd of their friends.

They had discarded their high-heeled boots, and adopted the Indian moccasins.

John Longlegs, who was popularly supposed to be the best runner of the two, was a tall fellow, with extremely long nether limbs, from which he derived his name, for, as the reader has probably guessed, Longlegs was not his right appellation.

Codingham, on the contrary, was a short, thick-set fellow, and he did not look to be anything like the runner that the long-legged fellow was, and so the other was the favorite in the betting.

Old Washakie, the Shoshone chief, with some fifteen of his braves, was on hand.

Washakie was a character, a man between sixty and seventy, yet as straight as a ramrod, with not a single gray hair in his coarse, raven locks.

In his early days he had been a "bad" Indian, and had given the settlers much trouble, but after getting soundly thrashed by the Government troops in half a dozen fights, in as many years, he had come to the wise conclusion that it did not pay to quarrel with the pale-faces, and going to the other extreme, got himself enrolled as a Government scout, and although there was no doubt that the old chief was a thorough-paced rascal, yet we must do him the justice to say that he was faithful to the trust reposed in him by the Government.

The sports had commenced to chaff the old chief in regard to his champion runner, telling him that his young man stood no chance this time and that the cowboys were going to beat him in the most hollow manner.

The old chief said not a word until the sports had finished, then, fixing his glittering bead-like eyes upon the banterers, he drew a handful of gold from his pocket and rattled the pieces in his hand, the gold chinking merrily.

"White men talk big—shoot off their mouth heap loud! Washakie talk with the ducats,



Come and see me! How much you white men bet that the red runner will get skinned?"

This was coming to the point with a vengeance, and for a few moments the scoffers did not know what to say, but the first one who recovered the use of his tongue inquired what odds the chief would give.

And then the old Indian retorted in the most scornful manner that if the white runners were as good as the pale-faces boasted, it was strange that they wanted odds.

And so the bantering continued, the red-skins easily holding their ground.

It was evident that the Indians had perfect faith that their man would win, but they were not willing to give any odds, though they eagerly accepted all bets offered at even money, but the only men who were willing to bet at all freely were new-comers in the district—strangers who were not posted in regard to the red-skins, abilities in the running line.

The old-timers had lost too much money betting against the Shoshone chief's, picked men to risk much wealth on this occasion, despite the brags of the cowboys in regard to what they could do.

Even Cattle Kate did not seem to be disposed to venture many dollars upon the issue, although she backed the cowboys for enough to make it interesting, but she manifested no disposition to "plunge," as she had been wont to do.

Old Washakie was extremely dissatisfied, and indulged in some extremely sarcastic remarks in regard to the whites' "backwardness in coming forward," and when his words were repeated to Mrs. Maxwell she laughed and observed:

"The old red rascal has been so accustomed to making a small farm every time his red bucks go into a race that he does not understand why we are not willing to bet all we have got, but there is another day coming, and we want to save our ducats to back our man to-morrow if his runner, White Deer, gets away with our two men to-day."

One of the sports who heard this remark was a friend of the Shoshone chief, and had backed White Deer heavily, so he lost no time in repeating the words to Old Washakie.

The red chief appeared puzzled; this was the first intimation he had received that both the cowboys were going to run against his young man on the first day. He had supposed that one of them would run on the first day and another on the second.

The Indian's suspicions were aroused immediately.

"What game she trying to play, hey?" he inquired.

"You are too much for me, old man," the sport replied with a shake of the head.

"What runners she got 'sides these two?"

"None that I know of."

"You would know if she had odder men?" the chief asked.

"Well, yes, as I am a near neighbor of hers I reckon I would have been apt to have heard something about it. The two fellows, Longlegs and Codingham, are all the runners I have heard of."

"If White Deer beats them to-day, she would not be fool enough to think he cannot do it to-morrow," the Indian remarked.

"No, unless thar is some trick about the matter."

"What trick, hey?" exclaimed the chief.

"Mebbe her idea of the race to-day is to get a line as to what White Deer kin do," the sport suggested, shrewdly.

"You mean that the white men will not run their best?"

"Yes."

"Neither will the White Deer if he sees that is to be the game!" Old Washakie declared. "The red chief is no fool. He will run fast enough to beat the white men, and that will be all."

Then the old red buck summoned the red-skinned runner and gave him instructions in the Indian language.

The time for the race came, and the three runners toed the scratch.

The Indian was a lithe, muscular young brave, finely put together, and looked far more likely to be a runner than either of his white opponents.

The three were to start at the crack of a pistol, and as they waited for the signal Old Washakie endeavored to "get on" a little more money, but the looks of the Indian runner, now that he was stripped for the race, scared the bettors and none of the sports cared to wager that he would lose.

The pistol-shot rang out clear and shrill and away the runners bounded.

Before they had run a hundred feet Old Washakie saw that there were no grounds for his suspicions that the whites intended to make a waiting race of it.

On the contrary they were evidently doing their level best, trying to "break the Indian's heart," as a racing man would say, by forcing the pace so as to exhaust the Indian in the beginning.

The old chief smiled grimly when the white sport whispered words to this effect in his ear.

To his notion that was a game that two could play at.

Longlegs had jumped off with the lead, the other cowboy right behind him and the Indian a yard in the rear.

The pace was a particularly hot one for the first eighth of a mile, and Cattle Kate who was timing the runners noted that it had been run in twenty-five seconds.

This agreed with what the stranger had said, and was positive proof that he knew what he was talking about.

Haverill was standing by her side and he noticed the time.

"They will do it in fifty," Cattle Kate said in his ear.

"Oh, no," Haverill replied, "the pace is too hot, they cannot keep it up. Longlegs is pumped out already."

This was true, for in a few seconds more Codingham passed him, and the Indian also, who was sticking to the white man—just a little in his rear—like his shadow.

The pace slackened a little.

Haverill was quick to notice this, and called Cattle Kate's attention to it.

"You see that they cannot keep it up!" he exclaimed. "To run the distance in fifty seconds is up to championship form, and although both the cowboy and the Indian are good men, yet neither one of them can be ranked in the first class."

"Will not the cowboy win?" demanded Mrs. Maxwell, quivering with excitement. "He seems to be holding his own."

The other shook his head; he was surveying the runners with the well-trained eyes of an expert, and so was able to perceive what was not apparent to the majority of the crowd, who were already beginning to shout:

"The cowboy wins!"

"Oh, no, his bolt is shot!" Haverill replied. "He is beginning to tire, while the red-skin has some speed left. You will see that at the last moment he will come away and win easily. He is a cunning runner and does not mean to allow the crowd to see by how much he could beat his man if he was disposed to make the effort."

"Could he beat him very badly?" asked Mrs. Maxwell, a frown contracting her brows.

"No, not more than a couple of seconds at the best. The Indian will not cover the distance in better than fifty-six!" Haverill exclaimed, decidedly.

The runners were rapidly approaching the goal, and the race ended just as Haverill predicted.

The cowboy tired in the last hundred feet, and the Indian passed him and came home a winner of the race by about three yards, but it was plainly to be seen that he could have won by six or seven if he had so desired.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE CHALLENGE.

THE moment the race was won, the crowd set up a great shout, for the majority of them had backed the Indian.

In this case it was strictly business; hardly one of them but would have preferred to see one of the cowboys win if they had not put up their money on the red-man, but all of them had argued that it would not do in a case of this kind to allow sentiment to have anything to do with this matter.

The Indian was a champion runner, and it was the general belief that there wasn't a white man in the Territory who could beat him.

The moment that Codingham passed the winning-post, he staggered and fell.

The exertions which he had put forward in the last few yards of the race had been too much for him, and tired nature had sunk under the strain.

John Longlegs did not run the full distance, but stopped, completely exhausted, on the last quarter.

The crowd rushed to Codingham's assistance, and the confusion gave Cattle Kate and Haverill a chance to exchange a few words without attracting attention.

"The Indian made it in fifty-eight seconds," Haverill observed. He had noted the time by Mrs. Maxwell's watch.

"Yes; it is not as good as I expected, considering how fast they ran to the turning-stake," Cattle Kate observed.

"You gave the men orders to do their very best right from the commencement?"

"Yes, just as you suggested."

"My object was to force the Indian to do his best, so I could learn just about how fast he was," Haverill explained. "I did not believe he could do the distance better than fifty-five, and now I am satisfied that I was correct."

"He perhaps could have done it in fifty-five, though, if he had been pushed in the last quarter?" Mrs. Maxwell observed, in a questioning tone.

"No, I do not think so; he could not possibly have cut more than two seconds off of the time, no matter how he had been pushed. He was pretty well played out when he passed the post."

"Yes, I think he was."

"Fifty-six is as good as he can do."

"And you can do better?"

"Yes, better than fifty-five," the other replied, in a tone of calm assurance.

Mrs. Maxwell hesitated for a moment before she spoke. It was evident that she was a little puzzled about the matter.

"You have not made any mistake about this matter, I hope?" she said. "Because if you have, it would turn out to be a costly matter for me, for I shall have to back you heavily if I put you up to run against the Indian."

"I will give you a trial to-night. You can time me, and if I do not run in better than fifty-five, you need not go on," Haverill replied. "All you will have to do now is to put up a forfeit when you challenge the old buck."

"You are so sanguine about the matter that I will go into it!" Cattle Kate exclaimed. "I will challenge Old Washakie for two hundred dollars a side, and put up fifty as a forfeit."

"That will be sufficient."

"And as the old fellow believes that I have put forward my best men to-day, it is certain that he will jump at the chance of another race, and he, and all his tribe will bet everything they have in the world upon the result."

"It will give you a chance then to get even with the old red fox."

"Yes, that is true, and I do not really care so much about the money as for the pleasure of beating the red heathen at his own game," Cattle Kate declared.

"Well, you are safe to do that. Barring accidents, there is not a doubt but what I can beat this Indian," Haverill affirmed. "All you will have to look out for is that I do not give you the double-cross," he added, with a smile.

"Oh, I am not at all afraid of that!" Mrs. Maxwell replied. "I am no child, and I think I know something of human nature; I do not believe that you would betray me and play into the hands of this old red rascal."

"You can rest assured that I would not," Haverill asserted. "And if we play our cards well we can give this wily red chief the most severe lesson in the gambling way that he ever had in his life."

"It will be a rare joke on the old red rascal," Cattle Kate exclaimed, exultingly.

By this time the cowboy had recovered his senses and was escorted from the field by some of his companions.

Old Washakie approached Mrs. Maxwell.

"The white men run well, but the red chief is like the deer whose name he bears," the old warrior remarked.

"Your young man is a good runner—there is no doubt about that, chief," Cattle Kate remarked.

"He is as fleet as the antelope, and can run with the wind when it chases the white clouds across the sky," responded the red man, dropping into the flowery fashion of speaking so common to the sons of the wilderness.

"The White Deer is the best runner in your tribe?" Mrs. Maxwell asked, in a tone of question.

"He is. Why ask you, hey?" the old chief inquired.

"Oh, I wanted to be sure that you had put your best man up, for if one of my men had won it would be a satisfaction to know that he had beaten the best runner in the Shoshone tribe."

"The White Deer is the best runner," Old Washakie asserted. "There is not a man who sets foot on the earth to-day who can beat him."

"Hello, hello! That is a pretty bold assertion," Cattle Kate exclaimed, as though surprised by the statement.

"It is the truth—the Shoshone chief cannot lie!" Old Washakie declared, with great dignity.

"Yes, but you may have made some mistake about the matter," Mrs. Maxwell urged.

The old Indian surveyed the woman for a moment with his glittering, bead-like eyes, and then he said:

"The red chief speaks what he knows. It is the truth!"

"For how much?" Cattle Kate inquired immediately, in a brisk, business-like tone.

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian, as if he did not understand.

"I have got two hundred dollars that says your man is not the best runner on earth," Mrs. Maxwell declared.

"Two hundred dollars!" and the eyes of the old Indian glistened.

"Yes, two hundred dollars, and I will put fifty right up now as a forfeit," and as she spoke Cattle Kate drew out five gold pieces and clinked them merrily in her hand.

An eager look came upon the dusky face of the savage; no music in this world so sweet to his ears as the clink of gold.

"The great white squaw has a man whom she will back to beat the Shoshone runner?"

"That is what I mean."

"For two hundred dollars?"

"Yes, for two hundred as a starter, and as much more besides that as you can raise and care to put up," Cattle Kate declared.

The conversation had attracted considerable of a crowd, and great was the amazement occasioned by this bold challenge, for after the decisive victory which the Indian runner had won,



the bystanders, for the moment, were inclined to believe that he was invincible.

The old Indian, too, was amazed, but no one could have detected this by any expression on his face, which more resembled that of a graven image than a human.

"The great white squaw talks big," Old Washakie remarked, throwing a peculiar expression into the words, as much as to insinuate that he thought she did not mean what she said.

"It is good honest talk all the same," Cattle Kate declared.

"This is no bluff!" she continued. "I do not believe that the White Deer is the best runner in the Territory, much less on earth, and my two hundred dollars says I will produce a man to-morrow who will, and can, beat him at a quarter of a mile run over the same course where the race took place to-day."

"Neither one of your men stand any chance," the old Indian declared. "They could not run with him to-day, and to-morrow they will not be any better."

"That is a shrewd dodge on your part to find out who my man is, eh?" Cattle Kate exclaimed, with a light laugh. "The party who catches you at a disadvantage will have to get up early in the morning."

"Well, now, I don't propose to name my man at present, but I will bet you two hundred—or more if you want to risk it—and put up fifty as a forfeit now, that I will produce a man on this track to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock who will beat your White Deer, or any other runner that you wish to trot out, in a quarter of a mile dash, the men to start at a pistol-shot and run over the same course that the race to-day took place on."

This bold defiance bothered the old chief, for he immediately suspected that there must be some trick about the matter, or Mrs. Maxwell would not be so confident.

But after turning the affair over in his mind he came to the conclusion that, nettled by the defeat her men had sustained, she was rash enough to want another trial, thinking they would be able to do better.

So Old Washakie went down in his clothes for his cash.

Producing fifty dollars, he announced his willingness to bet.

Square Dave Green was made stakeholder, and the money was placed in his hands.

The news soon got abroad that Cattle Kate had matched an "unknown" to run against the Indian racer, and great was the talk that the match occasioned.

The people were mystified, and the old sports, who were popularly supposed to be up to all kind of dodges, were called upon for their opinion, Dave Green in particular being pressed to say what he thought about the matter.

After weighing the affair carefully in his mind, he said:

"Well, boys, in my opinion thar are no flies on Cattle Kate, and she is not the woman to throw good money arter bad. The race to-day has shown her what the Indian can do, and it is my idee that she has not put forward her best man, but has held him back on purpose to clean the old red buck out; and, gentlemen, if her man shows up well to-morrow, I reckon he will carry some of my money."

This was the general opinion of the old sports, and all looked forward to a great day on the morrow.

#### CHAPTER XI.

##### HAVERILL IS SUSPICIOUS.

SAND CREEK was a busy place that night, for the most of the visitors remained in the town, only those who lived in the immediate neighborhood going to their homes.

Quite a number had come in wagons and these served as lodging-places; every place of shelter in the town was used to accommodate the crowd, and some enterprising fellows put up some rude tents and charged so much a head for the privilege of lodging in them.

A couple of long-headed sports hired the dining-room of the hotel and opened a "game" there and this apartment with Square Dave Green's tent were the centers of attraction.

Tom Payson, the foreman of the X L Ranch and Champagne Billy, the old sport, had been taken by the Cattle Queen into her confidence, and so were posted in regard to the agreement which had been made with Haverill.

The three were together in the hotel dining-room when the Silver Sharp sauntered in, and as they happened to be standing by the door, the three and the cool stranger had an opportunity to take a good look at each.

The Silver Sharp nodded to Payson as he passed and cast a glance at Haverill which made him feel decidedly uncomfortable, although he had self-command enough not to allow it to be seen.

"Who is that party?" Haverill asked, after the Silver Sharp passed.

Payson told all that he knew about him, including Cattle Kate's endeavor to secure him for her ranch.

"What was the idea of that?" Haverill asked. "It does not seem to me as if she could find anything on her ranch for such a man to do."

"Well, she did not reveal to me what her notions were on the subject, but from a few remarks she made I was able to make a good guess, I reckon, as to what her little game was," Payson observed.

"I am not well enough acquainted with the state of the case to hazard any conjectures," the other said.

"I know Mrs. Maxwell about as well as she knows herself, I reckon, and, as a rule, I can usually see what she is up to," Payson remarked, confidently. "Our ranch has got a rather bad name; when Maxwell was alive he was not as careful about hiring men as he might have been, and as a result at times he had some of the worst rustlers in the Territory on the ranch. Rustlers are men, you know who steal cattle by altering the brands."

The other nodded.

"It is the old story, the devil is not as black as he is painted, and these rustlers were not any where near as bad as some of the ranchers tried to make them out. We had better luck with our stock than the rest, and some of the neighbors, out of sheer jealousy, declared that if our men had not rustled we would not have had so many beeves to sell."

"They blamed the X L Ranch for their own bad luck."

"Exactly, and during the past few months there has been a couple of these men talking pretty badly about our place, and I understand that they threatened to put a detective on us so as to put a stop to our rustling."

"Yes, yes, I see, and she had a suspicion that this stranger was a detective?"

"That was her notion, I reckon."

"Well, I don't know as she is far out of the way, for he has a peculiar look, and a strange fashion of gazing at one. I noticed that he surveyed me intently as he passed."

"He saw, probably, that you did not look exactly like a cowboy, although you are dressed like one, and he was trying to make out what manner of man you were," Payson remarked.

"Well, what do you think about the matter?" the other asked. "Do you think he is a detective?"

"Oh, no, I reckon not. I never took much stock in the threats that were made that these men would put a detective on us. When men get angry they are apt to say a great many things which they do not mean, and so I never bothered my head about this detective business; I did not say anything about the matter to Mrs. Maxwell, for I know her of old, and she does not like to have any one dispute her ideas; but my notion about the fellow is that he is just what he represents himself to be, a sport who has been attracted to Sand Creek by the prospect of picking up a stake. What do you think about the matter, Champagne?" Payson said in conclusion to the old gambler, who had not taken any part in the conversation.

"Oh, I reckon the man is a sport sure enough," Champagne Billy answered. "Still he may be both a sport and a detective. I have known quite a number of men who combined the two. There is no doubt about his being a sport, for I watched him when he took a flyer at Square Dave's game, and the way he played showed that he was an old and experienced hand. He is a good man too with his fists, although he has got a kinder soft and womanish look, but the way he hammered the He Wolf from Laramie, was a caution."

Haverill had not witnessed this affair and so the old gambler related the particulars to him.

"Well, it certainly appears as if the man was a genuine sport," Haverill remarked, when Champagne Billy finished the recital. "The average detective, particularly if he was from the East, would never have been able to perform such a feat."

"Oh, if he was a detective, he would not come from the East—that is, not east of Denver," Payson observed. "That is the point from which he would be apt to trail. What made you think that any Eastern detective would be apt to take a hand in the matter?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I really did not think anything about it," Haverill answered. "I spoke carelessly without thinking."

This ended the conversation upon the subject, and after a while the three went out for a stroll around the town.

It had been arranged that the trial of Haverill's speed as a runner should be made as soon after midnight as possible.

The track was a good eighth of a mile from the town and the calculation had been made that by midnight about everybody in the town would be at rest, and the trial could take place without danger of any watchers being near at hand.

The surmise was correct.

By twelve o'clock about all the lights were out and the streets deserted.

Then Mrs. Maxwell and her party stole forth from the hotel and proceeded to the prairie where the track was located.

There was a bright moon, so there was ample light for the trial.

Haverill stripped for the race; Mrs. Maxwell held the watch—both Payson and Champagne

Billy also had their time-pieces out, so as to be sure that there could not be any mistake about the matter—and when Haverill came up to the mark and announced that he was ready, she gave the word "go!"

Haverill bounded off in a way that satisfied the party that he was an extra good man in the running line.

He went to the turn in twenty-four seconds and came home in thirty, making the total for the quarter fifty-four seconds.

When the time was announced to him he declared he could do it in two seconds better if needed.

"Oh, it is all right!" Cattle Kate declared. "We have a sure thing and we will win everything the red-skins have got!"

#### CHAPTER XII.

##### TAKEN INTO CAMP.

THE town was astir at an early hour in the morning, and from the time they got up the people talked of but little else but the coming race.

The folks did not know what to make of it.

Was the backing of the unknown only a "big bluff" on the part of Cattle Kate, as one prominent sport suggested, or had she really got a man whom she believed able to beat the Indian runner?

Who was the "unknown?" and the men who were well acquainted with all the people on the X L Ranch, puzzled their brains over this problem.

But no one of them professed to be able to solve it.

As far as they knew, John Longlegs and Jake Cordingham were the only two men among the cowboys who pretended to be able to do anything in the running line.

"If thar is another runner on the ranch, he has kept so durned quiet that nobody ever heered him peep!" one of Mrs. Maxwell's nearest neighbors asserted.

This statement had a deal of weight, and the majority of the people came to the belief that Cattle Kate did not have any new man, and that either Longlegs or Cordingham would be put forward by her when the unknown was called upon to appear.

And as few believed that either man stood any chance at all with the White Deer, there was not much betting upon the race.

Few indeed were willing to bet that either of the two cowboys could beat the Indian, and yet they hesitated to offer to bet upon the Indian for fear that Mrs. Maxwell might have a good man in reserve, so speculation upon the race was not brisk.

The only men willing to bet were old Washakie and his Shoshone chiefs.

The red-skins believed that their red runner was invincible, and they were willing to back him in the most liberal manner.

The savages were arrogant and said, tauntingly, that the white-skins were afraid to bet.

Then Payson and Champagne Billy pretended to be angered by these slurring remarks, and they declared, with a great show of indignation, that they would be hanged if they were going to be bluffed in that way.

They would not stand tamely by and see old Washakie and his red-skins scare the "hull town out of their boots!"

No, they would put up some money, "just for greens!"

And, to the amazement of the crowd, the pair were as good as their word.

They sought the Indians, who had gone into camp on the edge of the town, and proclaimed that they had come to bet that the White Deer could not beat Mrs. Maxwell's unknown.

"No red-man who ever came to Sand Creek is going to bluff me, if I know it!" Payson declared with a fine show of indignation.

Champagne Billy was equally as hot.

"I am a clean white man, all the way through and I am going to stand by my color!" he exclaimed.

"Your White Deer is a good runner but he ain't the best on earth, and I have got money, right hyer, which says that Mrs. Maxwell is going to trot out a man who kin beat him!" and then the old gambler flourished his wealth in the air.

Even so expert an old scamp as the Shoshone chief was deceived.

He came to the conclusion that the white men were going to be fools enough to bet on "a cat in a bag," and he was eager to take them up.

So after much chaffing by both parties, a few bets were made, then there was more talk, and the whites began to brag.

"I reckon you don't feel so durned sure that your man can win, arter all?" Champagne Billy began. "If I was the kind of man who was on the bluff I would be willing to bet that if I put up ducats enuff I would scare you right out of yer hide!"

"You bet!" Payson exclaimed. "If we shook the solid stuff at you you wouldn't dare to come up to the scratch!"

"The pale-faces talk big!" old Washakie remarked with great dignity. "When they talk money the red chief will answer them."



Then Champagne Billy plunged his hand into his pocket and brought forth more money. Payson did the same.

The crowd stared; the two men were running a big bluff in their opinion, and the Indians had the same belief.

More bets were made; the red-skins were anxious to put their money up, for they believed that they had a sure thing.

And then, proudly, Champagne Billy proclaimed: "I tell you what it is, fellow-citizens, we are the kind of men to tie to! We are all wool and a yard wide!"

"Yes, yes, you bet!" Payson assented.

"Old Washakie hyer is a good man if he is a little off color! I am not saying a single word against him, but if he thinks he kin come into Sand Creek and bluff the bull town, he has made a mighty big mistake."

"He nerer made a bigger in his life!" Payson cried. "We did not come out ahead yesterday but we will fix that all right to-day. Old man"—this to the red chief—"your runners don't stand the ghost of a show."

"For how much?" demanded Old Washakie in the most practical manner, drawing more money from amid the folds of his blanket.

"Yes, yes, how much?" cried a couple more of the warriors following the example of their chief by producing more wealth.

"For as much as you keer to put up!" exclaimed Champagne Billy in a sudden outburst, just as if he had become greatly excited.

"That is the way to talk!" Payson declared. "We are white men, we are, biggest kind of chiefs, and we mean business every time!"

He was apparently as much excited as the other, and the bystanders marveled greatly at it, for it was a very strange thing indeed that two such old hands as the gambler and foreman of the XL Ranch should suffer themselves to be carried away like a couple of fresh young greenhorns.

"Make an end of this matter!" Payson continued. "We are not going to be bluffed and we mean business from the word go. Put up all your money, every cent that you reds can scrape together and we will cover it, and that is the kind of men we are."

"Yes, put up your ducats!" Champagne Billy cried.

The old chief believed that this was an attempt to bulldoze him and he resented it.

"The pale-faces cannot bluff the Shoshone chief!" the old man declared, and to prove that he spoke the truth he put up all the money he had, the other Indians following his example.

The sums were promptly covered by Payson and Champagne Billy, much to the amazement of the crowd who were at a loss to account for the strange affair.

It did not take long for the news of the heavy betting to spread, and in an hour or so about everybody in the town was acquainted with all the particulars of the affair, and the more the matter was discussed the greater became the wonder.

The old sports, though, soon came to the conclusion that there was a deal of method in all this madness, and so a number of them got together and appointed a committee to wait upon Mrs. Maxwell.

The substance of their speech to the Cattle Queen was:

"We don't ask you to show us your hand so we will know your game as well as you do yourself, but just give us a friendly tip in regard to the man whom you are going to put forward to run the Indian. Is it Longlegs or Codingham, or a new galoot that you believe to be better than either one of the two? We ask the question because some of the gentlemen that we represent think that Longlegs or Codingham could beat the red-skin if they were to keep on running him from now until doomsday. We want a tip so we can do a little betting on the race."

Cattle Kate laughed.

"Well, gentlemen," she said after her merriment subsided. "I do not want to spoil sport, and so I will let you see a little of my game in advance. Neither Longlegs nor Codingham will run against the Indian, for I agree with you that the White Deer is too much for them. I have a new man, and as the race yesterday showed me about what the Indian can do I am satisfied that my fellow can beat the red-skin, and the best proof that I mean what I say, and am not trying to play any trick, lies in the fact that my friends have bet Old Washakie to a standstill. They have covered every dollar that the red heathen dares to put up."

Thus enlightened, the sports departed, returned to their friends, revealed the confidence which Mrs. Maxwell had reposed in them, and these sharps immediately began to offer to bet upon Cattle Kate's unknown.

Never since Old Washakie had first brought his fleet-footed Indians into the town, and bantered the white men to run against them, had there been so much excitement over a race, and when the time approached for the event to come off, there were few people in the town able to get to the track who failed to be present.

All were on the alert to see the unknown, and when at a signal from Cattle Kate Haverill

stepped forward and began to strip for the race, there was a general expression of astonishment.

All present who knew anything about Cattle Kate understood that he was a stranger, and not one of her cowboys.

And when the sports noticed his muscular development, and saw how well built he was for a runner, they began to grin, and exchanged knowing looks with each other.

They thought they had guessed Mrs. Maxwell's game.

She had become disgusted at having her men constantly beaten by the Indian runners, so she had sent East for a professional foot-racer, on purpose to "get away" with Old Washakie.

Even the Shoshone chief looked glum when he surveyed the fine proportions of the white man who was to run against his red greyhound.

The chief was a good judge of men, and he did not like the looks of this stranger.

To the chief's mind he appeared to be every inch the runner, and now, too late, he began to suspect that the cunning Mrs. Maxwell had succeeded in catching him in a trap.

Little wonder that the red-skins looked serious when it became apparent to them that the white man who was to run against their brave, gave promise of being an extra good man. They had bet about everything that they had in the world on the race; the most of them had bet even their weapons and their ponies, and if the white runner won they would not have much beyond the clothes in which they stood.

But, as we have said, it was too late to repine now. The bets were made, and all they could do, if fortune went against them, was to grin and bear it.

At the last moment, as the runners came up to toe the scratch, Mrs. Maxwell bantered Old Washakie to take another bet upon the result, but the chief, in a very sulky way, declined.

"Well, I have had the satisfaction of backing you down, anyway, whether my man wins the race or not!" Cattle Kate exclaimed.

Then the pistol shot started the men.

Haverill jumped off with the lead and made the pace.

Cattle Kate, watch in hand, timed the race.

The Indian runner realized that he had an extra good man to contend with, and so he did his best to beat his antagonist to the turning-stake, but the White Deer had met his master.

Haverill reached the stake first, turning it in twenty-four seconds.

"I'll bet a hundred dollars to fifty that my man wins the race!" Cattle Kate cried, gleefully, as she noticed the time.

But no one accepted the wager, and the only result the challenge produced was to deepen the scowl on the faces of the Indians.

The White Deer had surmised the moment he surveyed his opponent that he had an extra good man to contend with, and so he was resolved to do his best right from the beginning.

He understood that with a man who was as good if not a better runner than himself it would not do to allow him to gain a start of a yard or two at the commencement of the struggle, for if he gained such an advantage it might mean the loss of the race.

So the Indian did his level best right from the start, running as he had never had to run before, but the white man had the "foot of him," to use sporting phrase, and beat him to the turning stake without any trouble, and after rounding the stake Haverill had no difficulty in increasing the lead he had gained, for the red-skin was fairly "pumped out" by the exertions he had made.

Haverill beat him home by six yards, winning the race in fifty-three seconds.

The crowd fairly went wild when they saw that the Indian was beaten, and they howled and yelled at the top of their voices.

It was the first time that one of old Washakie's runners had ever suffered defeat.

The red-skins were disgusted, and plainly showed by their faces how angry they felt over the matter.

"I stand ready, chief, to give you your revenge at any time!" Mrs. Maxwell declared.

The old man gave a grunt in reply, and as soon as he had settled his bets departed, followed by his Indians.

The rout of the red-men was complete; their money and ponies were lost, and the most of them had even bet their weapons and blankets upon the race.

At last Cattle Kate had succeeded in turning the tables upon the Shoshone chief.

It was a great "umph" for the mistress of the XL Ranch.

#### CHAPTER XIII. BILLY THE KID.

APART from the wagers that the Indians had made there had not been much betting on the race, although after the easy victory which the White Deer had won over the cowboys, about every man in the town would have backed him to run against any ordinary man, but the mystery which surrounded the unknown had made the betting-men cautious.

They feared that there was some trick about the matter and so were afraid to speculate. Then

when the XL Ranch people began to back their man so freely their wonderment increased.

After the race was over though, there was hardly a man in town who did not think that he understood all about the matter.

Haverill was a regular professional runner from the East whom Cattle Kate had imported for the express purpose of beating the red-skins out of their wealth, and great was the way in which the crowd chuckled over the cunning trick.

After the race was over and the spectators were engaged in congratulating each other upon the discomfiture of the red-skins, a couple of men met amid the crowd and at once proceeded to shake hands like old acquaintances.

The two strongly resembled each other. Both were rather undersized men, with round, bullet-like heads, the hair cut short after the fashion of the prison crop, their features were coarse, their eyes small and evil-looking, and an expression of low cunning sat upon their faces.

They were dressed roughly after the frontier fashion, but the smaller one of the two, whose hair was inclined to be red and who sported a stubby beard of the same hue, was almost in rags, so worn was his clothing.

"Hello, hello! well, if you ain't about the last man I expected to see in this region!" cried the better-dressed man of the two, extending his hand to the other.

"Put it there, old pal!" exclaimed the red-headed fellow, seizing the other's hand and shaking it warmly. "You may take my head for a football if the sight of you ain't good for sore eyes!"

"I am mighty glad to see you, old man, although I must say that you are not in as fine feather as you used to be," he remarked with a critical glance at the well-worn costume of the other.

"Oh, no, I have been dreadfully down on my luck for the past few months," the red-bearded fellow replied with a doleful shake of the head.

"Well, I'm glad to see you, old pal, all the same for old time's sake, and as I am in good fettle now, mebbe I will be able to give you a hand."

"The Lord knows I need it badly enough," the other remarked.

"This ain't no place to talk, and as I reckon the picnic is over, s'pose we go back to the town. I know a quiet place where we kin git something to wet our whistles and kin talk all we like without any danger of anybody getting onto us."

"That is what we want! Sail in your elephants!"

So the two made their way out of the crowd and headed for the town.

"What is yer handle now?" the well-dressed fellow inquired as they walked along.

"Oh, the same as ever, Billy the Kid."

"You are like me; you hain't had to change it."

"Then you are still Tommy Jones?"

"Yes, that is what I am called."

"And are you located here?"

"Not in the town, but not far off. I am in the cowboy line now."

"So I reckoned from the way you was rigged out," Billy the Kid remarked with a look at the high-heeled boots of the other, an article of adornment which the genuine cowboy is particularly fond of.

"You are on the square now, I s'pose, and have given the cross life the go-by," Billy the Kid continued.

The other laughed, then looked around to be sure that no one was within hearing before he replied.

"Oh, well, I don't know about that," he said. "I reckon I would take a trick now as quickly as I ever did if it came in my way and there was a good chance of getting away with it."

"That is where your head is level!" the other exclaimed in a tone of commendation.

"I am on the XL Ranch and if you know anything about this country you will understand that if a man has the reputation of being a little crooked it don't hurt him any to speak of with the XL people."

"The XL ranch is Mrs. Maxwell's—Cattle Kate's, I believe?"

"Yes, that is so."

"Well, I have heered that a good many of her men ain't any more honest than they ought to be."

"Oh, you kin bet that we have got a gay set of boys!" the other declared.

"Yes, I have heered it said that she has a bigger lot of rustlers on her ranch than kin be found on any other place in the Territory."

"I reckon that is about so," Tommy Jones replied, with a laugh. "One thing is sure, we raise more beeves than any other ranch in the neighborhood, and some of 'em have got twice as many cows as we have."

"I have heered talk about something of the kind."

"Yes, some of the ranchers are inclined to be ugly about it, and if they caught our men doing the rustling act, there would be trouble."

"But I reckon your men are too well brought up to be caught," Billy the Kid observed.



"Well, now, you kin jest bet all the rocks you have got on that, and you would keno every time!"

"It is all right if your boys don't take a tumble sometime," the other remarked, with a wise shake of the head. "You know the best of men slip up once in a while."

"We are pretty careful how we work the trick, and I can tell you, Billy, that it will take a smart man to catch us."

By this time the two had reached the outskirts of the town.

There was a little saloon in the second house they came to, which bore the lofty title of the Metropolitan Hotel, supplemented by the seductive announcement that it was "The Cowboy's Home."

"This is the place," said Tommy Jones, when they came to the saloon. "There is a little room in the back of the bar which is used by poker parties, but that is only at night, and during the day it is at the service of any gents who want to have a quiet confab."

"That will suit us to a dot!" Billy the Kid declared.

The two entered the saloon; the proprietor, a rather under-sized but stockily-built fellow, who answered to the name of Irish Mike, greeted Jones with cordiality due to an old and valued acquaintance.

"This is an old pard of mine, Mike, Billy the Kid, whom I have just run across," Tommy Jones said, thus introducing his friend.

"Glad to see yez in my place!" exclaimed the proprietor, who spoke with a decided brogue.

"Billy the Kid is a good name, do ye mind, an' it's my belafe that I have met wid a dozen Billy the Kids since I kem to the West."

"Oh, yes, I haven't the slightest doubt of that," Billy the Kid rejoined. "The woods are full of them. There has been more Billy the Kids shot and bung east of the Mississippi than a man could shake a stick at in a week. But I did not get my name out in this region. I am from the East, and was called Billy the Kid there, long before I ever thought of coming West."

"My friend is a High Toby gentleman, who has taken some good tricks in his time," Tommy Jones explained.

The saloon-keeper looked at the stranger with decided interest. He understood the thieves' argot, and comprehended that the new-comer ranked high, although apparently a little down on his luck at present.

"I'm glad to meet yer, sur, an' yez must make my place yer headquarters while yez are in town," he remarked.

Then the pair withdrew into the back room, Jones ordering liquid refreshments as he passed the bar.

The saloon-keeper soon had the "old stuff" on the table, and the pair proceeded to do justice to the fiery liquid.

"Let me see, it is nearly three years since we parted in the East," Tommy Jones remarked.

"Yes, just about."

"I was mixed up in that Northampton Bank business, and had to cut and run when the detectives got after me," Jones explained.

"So I understood."

"I came out West, and though the detectives followed pretty hot on my trail, I managed to give them the slip, and have remained here ever since."

"Well, my story is about the same as yours," Billy the Kid remarked. "I got in trouble and had to skip, but was lucky enough to evade suspicion, and so got off without the detectives getting arter me."

"You were lucky," the other commented.

"Yes, I think so. Did you ever run afoul of any of the gang who called themselves the League of the Invisible Hand?"

"I did, and I was going to join the band when I got into the bank trick, and arter that bu'sted I had to git, as I told you."

"Well, I joined the gang, and for awhile the thing worked first-rate. We took some good big tricks, and everything was lovely, but it was the same old story: we came to grief in the end."

"And you had to emigrate?"

"Yes, but as the thing was, I was lucky enough to be in the background, and so managed to get away without being suspected, but I was terribly afraid that something might turn up to bring me into the thing, and so I got out."

"You were wise."

"The party that bu'sted the gang was not a regular detective—that is, if he was, nobody seemed to know it; he was a new man and jest lightning."

"Them new men very often do twice as well as the old detectives."

"This fellow did, for after he once got after the Invisible Hand Gang he smashed it up in no time."

"He must have been a holy terror."

"Ob, he was! there is no mistake about that!" Billy the Kid declared, with decided emphasis. "I happened to be near at hand when he went for the chief of the Invisible Hand Band, and nailed him dead to rights, so I had a chance to see what the man was like."

"He must have been a nervy fellow."

"You kin bet he was."

"Well, I like nervy galoots, even though they may be in the detective line."

"I reckon you would like to see this man who smashed up the biggest band that was ever known in New York."

"I reckon I would!" Tommy Jones declared.

At that moment Billy the Kid happened to glance out of the window.

"Talk of the devil and he appears!" he exclaimed.

"Eh, what is that?"

"You would like to see this man-hunter that I was speaking about?"

"Yes, but—"

"There he is!" exclaimed Billy the Kid, interrupting the other.

"Where?"

"That sporting-looking cove, walking along all by himself with his arms behind him."

Tommy Jones gazed eagerly through the window.

"You don't mean it?" he cried.

"Yes, I do."

"Haven't you made some mistake?"

"Nary time!"

"Why, that fellow is a sport from Sportville."

"Can't help that; he's my man!"

"His name is Ben Silver, but he is more often called the Silver Sharp."

"I don't know anything about his name. I never heard him called anything in the East, but he is the detective that bu'sted the Invisible Hand band and sent me scoting out of the East as fast as I could travel. I was mortally afraid that he would get on my track and send me up to Sing Sing to join the rest of the gang."

"It is mighty odd," the other remarked in a reflective way.

"He is an odd chap."

"The man is a stranger here."

"Of course."

"But he seems to be such a regular sport that I should never have suspected that he was anything else."

"Ob, he is jest old p'ison, I tell you!" Billy the Kid affirmed, with great earnestness.

"Do you suppose he is arter anybody?"

"Why, you kin bet every dollar that you have got in the world that he is."

"You don't reckon that he is on your track?"

"Ob, no; I am too small fry for a big gun like he is to trouble himself about," Billy the Kid answered, with a shake of the head. "Besides, I have not been in any trouble lately. I am not wanted. Although I was one of the Invisible Hand band, yet I was lucky enough to slip out of the net which this man threw around the rest, without being suspected. I gave leg bail when the explosion took place, for fear something might happen to bring me into the thing, but as the affair turned out I was foolish, for a couple more who were as deep into it as I was, stayed in New York and were not bothered."

The brow of the other became dark and a troubled look came over his face.

"It may be possible that he has come here to look arter us XL Ranch galoots," Tommy Jones remarked. "Some of the neighbors, who don't like Mrs. Maxwell, have been threatening that they would put a detective on us, and mebbe they have engaged this man."

"Well, it is possible, of course, but it don't seem to me that it is very probable. He is too big a man to bother his head to come out here to look into a little cattle rustling."

"Detective or not, he is one of the best men that ever struck this town," and then Tommy Jones related to his old pal how the Silver Sharp had conquered the He Wolf from Laramie.

"You kin bet all you are worth that he is a good man, and I tell you what it is, old pal, I should be like the coon: I should be mighty apt to come down without putting him to much trouble, if he got after me."

"I reckon Cattle Kate would kinder prick up her ears if she knew this man was a detective, and she would be willing to give a good lot of ducats to know what his game is, too, I reckon."

A sudden idea came to Billy the Kid.

He leaned forward and through the window watched the retreating form of the Silver Sharp for a moment.

His companion noticed the look upon his face and guessed that some project had entered his mind.

"What is it, Billy, what is in the wind?"

"Say! I've got an idea that, mebbe, will pan out some ducats!"

"That is what we need; hold on to it, Billy!"

"You think Mrs. Maxwell will pony up some cash to learn what game this man is up to?"

"Not a doubt of it!"

"Well, I reckon I might be able to make a raise then."

"How kin you find out what his game is?" asked Tommy Jones, evidently doubtful.

"I think I kin work it," the other replied.

"How is he situated? Does he appear to be all alone—no pals?"

"Nary one, I reckon. He is a stranger here and has no pal, unless there is one in the background, keeping dark."

"The odds are big that he is trying to work his trick, whatever it is, single-handed. Now my game is just as easy and simple as can be."

I will go to him and say that I know who he is; I will explain that I used to be a doorman in the Central Office at New York and so knew that he was a detective. Tell him that I came out West on a speculation and have had a hard run of luck—that I am anxious to get East again, and am willing to do almost anything to make a stake."

"That is a good yarn," the other remarked, approvingly.

"I reckon it will go. Then I'll ask him if he don't want some one to do a little work for him; say that I am well-posted in detective work, and, if he has a job on hand, I will be glad to help him."

"I don't see any reason why the trick will not work!" Tommy Jones declared.

"Neither do I, unless his suspicions are roused in regard to my not being what I represent myself to be."

"Oh, I do not think that there will be any danger of that, for he will argue that if you wasn't connected with the Central Office you would not know anything about him."

"That is my idea exactly, and if he is engaged in any game here the chances are big that he will need just such a man as I am."

"Yes, yes, and if you work the trick right, and find out that he is arter the XL Ranch boys, you can depend upon it that Mrs. Maxwell will come down handsomely with the ducats if you get hold of any valuable information."

"I will make the trial; I think I can work it, and if I fail there is no harm done."

"Not a mite, but to my thinking the odds are big that you will succeed. Let us wet our whistles again and we will drink to the success of the game."

Billy the Kid was agreeable, so more whisky was disposed of, and then the two went forth, Tommy Jones to join the XL cowboys and his old pal to interview the New York detective who now called himself the Silver Sharp.

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### THE PROPOSAL.

By the time that Billy the Kid got on the track of the Silver Sharp, that gentleman had reached the hotel, where he helped himself to one of the vacant chairs which were standing in front of the building, sat down and lit a cigar, which he smoked in a lazy sort of way, just as if he was doing it more to pass away time than from any real enjoyment in the "weed."

Billy the Kid came slowly up, studying the face of the Silver Sharp as he approached.

"Yes, it is my man!" he muttered, in a tone of conviction. "It is my man for a thousand dollars! I haven't made any mistake."

"But hold on a moment!" he exclaimed, abruptly. "Let me cogitate a bit over this here thing—lemme see what is the best game for me to play."

Then the fellow leaned against a corner of a house, still keeping his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the sport, who smoked away unconscious that he was being thus closely watched.

"If this man's business here is to make it warm for Cattle Kate and her gang of rustlers, what is the best game for me to play? Wouldn't I be apt to do as well to go in with him as to go ag'in' him?"

The man pondered for some time over this difficult question.

"Cattle Kate has got the ducats, and there is no doubt that she would shell them out pretty freely if she was satisfied that I could do her any good. Then, on the other hand, this man is a tough one to deal with, and if he discovered that I was giving him the cross, he would be apt to try and make it warm for me."

"It is a mighty difficult matter for a man to decide just how to work a game like this," he murmured, after remaining silent for a few moments reflecting upon the matter.

"I s'pose I had better have a talk with him—just pump him a bit to see how he takes the notion, and then I may be able to decide."

And, having come to this conclusion, Billy the Kid approached the hotel, took one of the chairs, and sat down by the side of the Silver Sharp, who did not appear to take any notice of his approach.

"This is a nice day," Billy the Kid observed, nodding in an extremely friendly manner to the other as he spoke.

"Yes, it is."

"Did you win much stuff on the race?"

"No, not much."

"If I hadn't been down on my luck so that I hadn't any ducats to bet, I would have dropped some money, for I would have gone my pile on the Injun."

"Yes, these Indians are generally good runners."

"Say, it seems to me that I have seen you before!" Billy the Kid exclaimed, abruptly.

"Is that so?" the Silver Sharp inquired, in a tone of calm unconcern, as though he did not attach any importance to the matter.

"Yes; I have a mighty good memory for faces, and arter I once see a man I seldom forget him."

"That is a valuable gift."

"I'm from the East, you know."



"Yes?"

"From New York—same place you hail from."

A peculiar look came into the eyes of the Silver Sharp, but he puffed away at his cigar for a few moments before he spoke; then he said:

"You are from New York?"

"Yes."

"And what makes you think that I am from New York?"

"Why, I know it!"

"You do."

"Yes, certain of it. I knew you the moment I set my two eyes on you, though you are rigged up in this fancy kind of way," Billy the Kid asserted in the most positive manner.

"I think that you have made some mistake. I have a pretty good memory for faces myself and I cannot recall the fact that I ever met you before anywhere, either in New York or elsewhere."

"Oh, I didn't say that you knew me."

"Ah!"

"But I know you all the same."

"Indeed?"

Then Billy the Kid bent over and in a low and cautious tone said:

"I was a doorman in the Central Office."

The Silver Sharp looked at the other in an inquiring way.

"The Central Office?"

"Yes, you know!" and there was a touch of impatience in the fellow's tone.

"I reckon you have got the best of me, stranger," the Silver Sharp remarked with a doubtful shake of the head.

"Ah! what is the use of trying any gum-game of this kind?" Billy the Kid exclaimed in a disgusted way. "I know who you are as well as if you were my own brother, although you don't know me from a side of sole-leather."

"Oh, I reckon not; you have made some mistake!" the other declared.

"Nary mistake."

"You are deceived by the resemblance that I bear to some other man. It is the old story of the fellow who looks like me."

"Oh, no, it ain't! I know you well enough," Billy the Kid persisted. "And I reckon I kin make a pretty good guess at the business which brings you here too."

"Lord bless you! I haven't got any business!" the other declared. "I am a gentleman of leisure, and my principal occupation is playing cards with men who think they know more about the pasteboards than the fellows who make a living by them."

"Oh, yes, that is all right for a blind—that is a good enough stall but I know better!"

"No, no, you are only fooling yourself!"

"Say! I didn't come and sit down here for to talk to you just to pass away the time, you know!" Billy the Kid declared, becoming extremely confidential.

"Is that so?" exclaimed the Silver Sharp in a bantering way.

"Oh, I mean business, every time."

"Business, eh?"

"Yes, but this isn't a place to talk; it is too public, you know; some galoot with long ears might catch on to the thing and then all the fat would be in the fire."

"Well, that would be bad."

"S'pose we take a little walk so as to have a chance to talk the thing over without any danger of being overheard."

"Oh, no, this will do well enough," the sport replied. "Fire away with what you have to say. I am not at all afraid of anybody overhearing the conversation."

The New York crackman looked disappointed, for he argued that this boded ill for the success of his scheme.

"Well, if I was you I wouldn't take any chances," he grumbled.

"Ah, but you see that is just the kind of man I am. I am always taking chances," the Silver Sharp replied, in his cool and easy way.

"Well, I will go ahead, for I reckon that there is a stake for me in this thing, and I want to pull it out if I can."

"That is the right way to figure," the other remarked, with the air of a philosopher. "Always try to make your stake if it looks as if you stood any chance to do it at all."

Billy the Kid looked annoyed, for he fancied that the other was chaffing him, and he did not like it, still he kept right on.

"As I told you, I was a doorman at the Central Office," he said, "and that is how I come to know you, although you don't know me."

The other nodded, as if to say that he understood that this was not improbable.

"I don't know your name, but I do know that you were counted to be one of the shrewdest detectives on the force, although you were a new man."

"Why, you are making me out to be quite a distinguished character," the Silver Sharp remarked, with a light laugh.

"Oh, yes, I reckon from what the boys said that you could give points to almost any man on the force," Billy the Kid asserted. "I remember the time when that powerful secret gang who called themselves the Brothers of the Invisible Hand was broken up; now I heard a deal of talk among the boys, and they all gave you the

credit of working the job, and they declared that you did it to the queen's taste."

Again the peculiar look came into the eyes of the sport, and he cast a rapid, earnest glance at the face of the other, then he laughed as if he considered the matter to be a good joke.

"Oh, you may laugh, but I am giving it to you as straight as a string," Billy the Kid declared. "I am telling you just what the boys said, and the fellows who were talking it over were some of the best men on the force, too."

"Well, I should feel highly flattered by the compliment, only I don't happen to be the man," the Silver Sharp rejoined.

Billy the Kid shook his head, and a disgusted look appeared on his face.

"You won't have it?" he exclaimed.

"Not much! Why, if I am the man you think I am, what on earth am I doing out here, at the very jumping-off place of civilization?"

"That is just the point I am trying to get at," the other exclaimed, eagerly. "What lay are you on, anyway? Of course it is something big, or a man like yourself would never come away out here from New York, and this idea of passing yourself off as a sport is a mighty good one, for it enables you to kinder loaf around the town, keeping yer eyes open all the time, and no one thinks that there is anything wrong about it. It is as good a game as I ever saw played, and it shows that you are away up at the top of the ladder in your business."

"Compliments fly when the quality meet," the Silver Sharp observed, dryly.

"Now, when I caught on to this little game of yours, I said to myself, here's a chance for me to make a stake," Billy the Kid explained. "He will need some man like myself to do a little shadowing or something of that sort, mebbe. I reckoned that you were trying to work the game alone, for I didn't see that you had anybody with you."

"You are quite right as far as that is concerned," the other remarked. "I am playing a lone hand just now and there isn't any one in with me."

"Can't you give me a chance then?" inquired Billy the Kid, eagerly. "You will find that I am a good man, for I haven't been 'round the Central Office without picking up a thing or two in the detective line."

"Old fellow, you are barking up the wrong tree I tell you!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed. "I am no more a detective than you are a member of this Invisible Hand band that you have just been telling about. I can let you catch on to my game in a mighty few words. I am here to clean out any man who thinks he can play cards better than I can, and has the cash to back up his opinion. This is the line that I am on, and I reckon I don't need any pards. You are away off, as I told you at first!"

"Mebbe I am, but there's no harm done," and then Billy the Kid retreated.

"Since you won't let me into the thing I will do my level best to spoil yer game!" the crackman muttered.

## CHAPTER XV.

### CATTLE KATE SPEAKS PLAINLY.

TOMMY JONES was in waiting a short distance down the street, anxious to learn the particulars of the interview, and as his old pal came slouching along he judged from the expression upon his face that he had not succeeded in making much out of the sport.

"Didn't make it, hey?" he cried, as Billy the Kid came up.

"No, he wouldn't have it for a cent!" the other replied with a disgusted air. "Sure he wasn't the man I took him to be. He said he was only a sport and not on the detective lay at all."

"You are quite certain that you have not made any mistake about the matter?"

"Do you think I am the kind of a man to make any mistake about a bloodhound of this kind?" Billy the Kid cried, indignantly.

"No, you are too old a hand at the business."

"It is the New York detective, I tell you, for a thousand dollars! and the fact that he is so anxious to deny that he is on the detective lay satisfies me that he has got some big job on hand."

"It is more than likely that he is after us XL Ranch people," Tommy Jones remarked with a thoughtful air. "I don't see what other game he can have in this region."

"No, it looks as if he was arter you."

"He is a good man—there is no mistake about that, but if he comes arter Cattle Kate and her men he will be apt to be put where the dogs won't bite him!" Tom Jones declared.

"I have been thinking over this matter," Billy the Kid remarked. "Don't you think it would be better for me to watch this fellow for a while afore anything is said to Mrs. Maxwell? Mebbe I can get some points which will show her that this man is going to be mighty dangerous."

"Yes, that is a good idea. But how are you off for money?"

"About broke!"

"Well, I will stake you until you make a raise and then you kin pay me back."

"All right! I will do as much for you some time."

And then the two walked down the street toward the saloon where they had held the interview, which was the headquarters for the XL Ranch cowboys when in town.

By this time Cattle Kate was well on her homeward road.

After the race she had come in to the hotel, paid her bill, and ordered horses saddled for herself and Haverill.

She had given him his chance between remaining in the town and celebrating his victory with the cowboys, who were inclined to make a hero of him, or coming with her to the ranch.

"Oh, I will go with you," he replied. "I am not a drinking man, and will be glad to get away from the crowd."

And so it was that Cattle Kate and Haverill rode on alone over the prairie.

There were no words exchanged between the two until they were well out of the town, and then Mrs. Maxwell, fixing her lustrous dark eyes inquiringly upon the face of her companion, said, abruptly:

"I have been wondering what on earth ever sent a man like yourself out to this wild region."

"And is the riddle too much for you?"

"Yes, it is."

"Oh, well, a love of adventure—the restless fever which infests men and makes them leave familiar scenes to seek for fortune far away."

"Yes, but you are not the kind of man to rough it amid a wilderness like this," Cattle Kate remarked.

"Oh, I don't know about that. I think that on the frontier you will find all kinds of men."

"True, but you will not find more than one man like yourself in every thousand."

"I hardly think the percentage is as small as that," Haverill replied, with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, it is!" Cattle Kate declared, in the most positive manner. "I am a good judge, and you can depend upon what I say. There are plenty of young fellows from the East among the cowboys, but they are not of your stamp."

"I don't want to seem to pry into your affairs, but the curiosity with which you have inspired me makes me ask, do you like this kind of life—are you satisfied to remain a cowboy?"

"No, I can't say that I particularly admire the cow-puncher's trade, but a man must live, you know, and that is about the only thing that a fellow can do out in this country."

"Yes, that is true, but I can find something better for you to do on my ranch. I fancy that you are a scholar."

"Yes, I am."

"And can keep books?"

"Oh, yes. I understand bookkeeping."

"You are just the man I want, then, for my accounts get all muddled up, and Payson, though a good foreman, is all at sea when it comes to keeping books."

"I guess I can give you satisfaction."

"There's another queer thing about you!" Mrs. Maxwell declared, with the abrupt frankness so peculiar to the woman.

"And what is that?"

"How comes it that you are such a runner?"

"Nature gifted me in that way, I suppose," Haverill replied, with a quiet smile.

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that!" Cattle Kate exclaimed, impatiently. "But how comes it that you knew so well what you could do, and the very time, too, in which the race could be run?"

"Because I have run before, of course."

"Yes, but you are not a professional runner."

"No."

"I have it!" Mrs. Maxwell exclaimed. "You have been a member of one of these amateur clubs."

"Yes, you are right there."

"And you must have been in a good position to belong to such an organization. That is, I judge by what I know of the men who held prominent position in the amateur athlete clubs of Chicago."

"Yes, my position was good, but I was not a champion runner by any manner of means, for a champion can do the distance in fifty and I cannot do them better than fifty-three."

"You were good enough to beat the red-skin and that is all I wanted!" the lady declared. "At last! I have succeeded in beating Old Washakie at his own game and now I am satisfied."

"You certainly cleaned the old rascal out in the most complete manner."

"Yes, I have cured him of boasting of what his young men can do in the running line for one while. By the way, Mr. Haverill, I do not doubt that you have come to the conclusion that I am about as strange a woman as you ever met?"

"Well, you are odd; there is no mistake about that," Haverill admitted, frankly.

"It is my life that made me so, and therefore I ought not to be blamed if I am not like other women," Cattle Kate remarked, a tinge of bitterness perceptible in her tone. "I was left an orphan at an early age and was brought up by charity. When I was about ten years old the folks who took care of me, they were relatives



of my mother, made the discovery that I possessed a good voice for singing, and that it was no trouble at all for me to familiarize myself with the songs of the day."

"Quite a gift," Haverill remarked, interested in the story.

"Yes, after I heard a song sung two or three times I could repeat it without making a mistake in either the words or music. There was a little variety theater in the neighborhood and one of the family with whom I lived worked on the stage there, and through him I was brought to the notice of the management."

"They were glad, no doubt, to secure an infant prodigy."

"Yes, I was successful and my protectors kept me right on in the life, they kindly taking care of the money which my labors brought," Mrs. Maxwell remarked, her lip curling in contempt.

"That is usually the way."

"But as I grew up, though, I began to have a spirit of my own and when I got to be about fifteen I came to the conclusion that I was old enough to take care of the money that my talents brought."

"Your protectors objected, of course."

"Oh, yes, and there was a stormy time when I told them that I was no longer a child and that I meant to have control of the money in the future. I was then receiving a salary of thirty dollars a week, every penny of which was taken from me, and they grumbled about allowing me sufficient to procure suitable clothing for myself."

"I judge from what little I have seen of you that after you made your stand you did not recede from it."

"Indeed, I did not!" Cattle Kate declared, with flashing eyes. "They declared that I was not of age, they were my legal guardians and that I must submit."

"And what did you reply to this?"

"I ran away!"

Haverill laughed heartily.

"That must have astonished them!"

"Oh, it did!" and the woman smiled as the remembrance of the past came to her.

"I had plenty of so-called friends, and a multitude of admirers, all ready to counsel me how to act."

"A young and pretty girl seldom lacks friends," Haverill remarked.

"When I ran away I did not go alone. One of the performers accompanied me."

"A gentleman, I presume."

"Yes, he was a negro comedian, a handsome, dusky fellow, and an excellent performer, but altogether too fond of liquor."

"Talent and a love for strong drink seem to run together in some men."

"He had been making love to me for a long time, but I don't think I would have listened to him if I had not had the trouble with my people. Then, in my anger at being threatened by them, he saw an opportunity which he was quick to improve. He urged me to elope with him, and I, in my blind, unreasoning rage at being threatened, consented."

"It is the old story over again."

"Yes, I believe the fellow loved me, and although I knew that he drank hard, I had faith in his promise that if I would become his wife he would stop drinking."

"Such promises, though, are usually like pie-crust, only made to be broken," Haverill commented.

"It was so in my case. After we ran away we did not have any trouble about getting married, for I was large for my age, and looked to be eighteen at the least. My people gave chase, and even after they found I was married, attempted to separate me from my husband, so they could get me back in their clutches again; but my husband had wit enough to get a good lawyer, and he soon convinced the magistrate before whom I was brought that the people who were trying to get me away from my husband had no legal claim to me."

"Of course, and they were foolish to invoke the aid of the law."

"I departed in triumph with my husband. All the world seemed to be bright and beautiful to me then—there did not seem to be a single cloud hanging over my life path. Ah, the bright day-dreams of youth!" Cattle Kate heaved a deep sigh, and covered her eyes with her hand for a few moments.

"Yes, to the maiden, or the youth, just tasting the delights of freedom, everything seems fair and bright, but it does not take long for them to discover that roses have thorns, and that everything is not exactly as it seems," Haverill remarked, in a cynical way.

"It did not take me long to wake from my dream of happiness," Cattle Kate remarked. "In a week after the court trouble was settled, my husband and myself were at work again in a variety theater, but before we got through our first engagement my husband was discharged, for he went upon a spree that lasted three days."

"That must have opened your eyes to the fact that you could not place much reliance upon his word."

"Yes, it did, and I was no weak, love-sick

girl, either, to submit to be abused, for when I attempted to remonstrate with him, and reminded him of how he had sworn that he would let liquor alone if I would only marry him, he laughed in my face, and said that now he had got me he was going to do exactly as he pleased."

"Well that was pleasant for a young wife to hear."

"As I told you, my temper was none of the best and I retorted hotly, so a violent quarrel ensued, and my husband, rendered ugly by the liquor he had drank, swore he would whip me like a naughty child for daring to talk back to him."

"A nice sort of a fellow indeed!"

"He only slapped me once for I caught up a heavy poker that happened to be handy and knocked him down as promptly as though I had been used to doing that sort of thing all my life."

"And did that teach him sense?"

"Indeed it did!" and Cattle Kate laughed merrily as she recalled the past. "He was only a miserable coward, and the moment he was knocked down he howled murder at the top of his lungs. A crowd rushed in, of course. 'The wretch is trying to kill me!' I cried and the way they cuffed and kicked the fellow into the street was a caution."

Haverill laughed.

"I presume he did not ever try to beat you again?"

"I never saw the fellow after that. He went on a spree to console himself, and I came back to Chicago. I had no difficulty in getting engagements and soon made the acquaintance of one of the leading lawyers of the city. He made love to me of course; all men who have a little money consider that a variety actress is fair game. By this time I had grown wise and so I bade my would-be lover prove the sincerity of his passion by procuring me a divorce from the man who had ill-treated me."

"That was a good idea."

"It is easy enough to get a divorce in Chicago at the present day, but at the time of which I speak it was still more easy, and within a week from the time when I told my lover he could prove his love by freeing me from the bonds which had grown so irksome, the decree of divorce was in my hands."

"Well, that was quick work."

Then my gentleman thought he had secured me. But there is an old saying of 'once caught, twice shy' and I acted up to it. I had had enough of married life and preferred to be free. Men as lovers are very nice and pleasant to have, but when they become husbands they are apt to be tyrants."

"Yes, some are; there is no doubt about that," Haverill observed. "But for all your dread of married life you became Mrs. Maxwell."

"Yes, and it was strange too, for I had not the least idea of marrying him. He came to Chicago to attend to his cattle business, happened to drop into the theater where I was singing, became infatuated with my humble self and after that pursued me like my shadow."

"I began by laughing at the man with his queer western ways and his curious manners, and then almost before I became conscious of the fact I grew interested in him and listened with great attention to his stories of ranch life in the far West. He seemed to bring the breeze of the plains and the free airs of the mountains with him, and the first thing I knew I found myself watching for the man's coming."

"I can understand it, he was so entirely different from the other men who surrounded you that you became interested in him despite yourself," the other remarked.

"Yes, I suppose that was it," Cattle Kate observed, thoughtfully. "And then, all of a sudden, the stage life became distasteful to me. I hated the glare of the footlights, and the sea of faces in front of the house irritated me."

"Then there came a row with the manager of the theater—business was not good, and he wanted me to take less salary."

"At this critical moment along came Maxwell with his everlasting petition:

"'You had better marry me, honey, go West to my ranch, and grow up with the country!'"

"And on the spur of the moment you accepted his offer?"

"Yes; and do you know, strange as it may appear, when it is considered what sort of a life I have led from early childhood, I do not remember that I have ever regretted that I made the change even for a single moment."

"And yet I do not doubt that you have had plenty of care and trouble in this life, too?"

"Oh, yes, indeed I have!" Cattle Kate exclaimed immediately. "Particularly since Maxwell's death. While he was alive I got along nicely. He was a good fellow. I can't say that I loved him after the style in which women gush over men in novels, but we got along without any trouble; he treated me well, and I tried honestly to be a good wife to him. I don't believe that it is in my nature to love any man very much—I am not built that way."

Haverill laughed.

"Well, you are honest about it, at all events."

"Yes, I am more honest than people give me credit for being. Now about this rustling business. Some of my neighbors are making a good deal of talk about some of my cowboys doing the rustling act. Now, if you come right down to the actual truth, there is hardly a ranch in the Territory that has not got some rustlers among its men, and those fellows rustle just for pure mischief. Of course, if they brought it home to any of my men, I would bounce them in short order, but I am not going to make any cowboy skip on mere suspicion."

"Certainly not; that would be unjust."

"Now, Mr. Haverill, I'm an awful plain, straightforward kind of a woman!" Cattle Kate exclaimed, abruptly, "and I am going to say, right out in your face, that I have taken a great fancy to you, and I suppose it is because you are as different to the other men who surround me as Maxwell was to my Chicago lovers. I have an idea that maybe the reason you come West was because you had trouble in the East. If that is so, and you think there is any danger of anybody coming after you, you need not worry, for it would take an army to take you from my ranch."

Mrs. Maxwell's eyes flashed and her cheeks glowed with color as she spoke, looking every inch the Amazon.

"I am much obliged to you for your assurance, but I trust no trouble will come. I am glad that you like me and pleased that you are frank enough to own it. I am impressed with you, and if we get on well together there isn't any reason why I should not live and die with you on the XL Ranch."

Involuntarily Cattle Kate extended her hand, Haverill took it and then leaned over and kissed her not unwilling lips, and so the compact was made.

#### CHAPTER XVI.

##### A FRONTIER FRAUD.

THE Silver Sharp pulled away leisurely at his cigar as the New York cracksmen retreated and watched the man out of the corner of his eyes.

"That fellow is a smart and cunning rascal," he mused. "And if I wanted a man to play the spy on any one it is doubtful if I could get a better shadow—if he could be trusted, and that is just where the difficulty comes in, for though I never saw the fellow before yet I am satisfied that I have taken his measure as well as if I had known him for a long time. A stake of sufficient amount would make him betray his own brother, and if a man placed any confidence in him the chances are great that he would attempt to sell out his employer just as soon as he could discover any one who he thought would be likely to pay a good price for the information."

"The fellow is a sly rogue, but not sharp enough to make a fool of me with all his smartness," and the speaker chuckled quietly to himself.

Just at this point loud voices coming from the hotel saloon attracted his attention.

There was an open window just at his elbow, and through it he could look into the saloon and see all that was going on.

The noise was made by one of two men standing in front of the bar.

He was a tall, lanky fellow, dressed like a sport, wearing a suit of "store clothes," very much the worse for wear, and was evidently considerably under the influence of liquor.

The other was a short, fat man of middle-age, who, from his dress, appeared to be a cowboy. He had a jolly, round, red face and looked as if he was the last man in the world to get into trouble; in this instance he was not at all to blame, as the Silver Sharp soon discovered.

The lanky fellow had invited the other man to take a drink; the fat fellow was seated in a corner, reading a newspaper, when the lanky man came in.

The new-comer had drank just enough to put him in the humor to quarrel with somebody, and he had pitched upon the middle-aged cowboy for a victim.

"Darn my ole mule's left hind foot! come up and have a drink!" he had cried, seizing the fat man by the shoulder and hustling him up to the bar.

It is contrary to the rules of frontier etiquette to decline a drink when it is tendered, and although the way in which the invitation was given was not calculated to make a favorable impression upon a man, yet when the newspaper reader "sized up" the giver of the invitation he came to the conclusion to treat the matter as a joke.

"Certainly, of course, I shall be delighted—the 'pleasure we delight in physic's pain!' he exclaimed in a peculiar, pompous way."

"Wot in the name of the everlasting hills ar' you givin' me!" the lanky man cried, pretending to be angered by the way in which the other spoke. "Can't you speak good, plain United States talk, and not git off any sich darn trash as that ar'?"

"Oh, yes, I am right there every time!" the other said, soothingly. "I only dropped into poetry a bit; it is a leetle failing that I have."



"Wa-al, you had better not do it ag'in!" the lanky fellow exclaimed, threateningly. "I have known good men shot for putting on frills of that kind!" and the speaker scowled savagely at the fat fellow.

"'Pon my word, I meant no offense, you know" the other hastened to declare.

"Wa-al, I'm glad of that, for I am a stranger in this hyer town, an' I don't want to go in to help fill up the graveyard right on the jump!"

"Of course; certainly not," and the fat man laughed as though the other had given utterance to a good joke.

"W'ot in thunder are ye grinning at?" the lanky man demanded, indignantly. "Do you see anything funny 'bout me? By the everlasting hills! I want you to understand that I don't allow no two-legged man to grin at me. But I see how it is—you want to pick a fuss with me." And then he scowled at the fat fellow in a truly diabolical way.

The other was considerably alarmed, for he had a strong objection to being drawn into a quarrel with the stranger.

"Oh, no, not at all; nothing was further from my thoughts, I assure you. I am a man of peace."

"And w'ot's yer name?" the big fellow demanded, abruptly.

"Perkins, Jerry Perkins, and very much at your service, sir," and the fat man made an elaborate bow.

"Wah!" cried the other, in a tone of the utmost contempt. "Durn me ef you don't make me sick with yer bowing and scraping! I would a heap sight rather a galoot would give me a smash in the nozzle than to come any bowing and scraping 'round me like a blamed frog-eating dancing-master!"

"Do you know who I am?" and the man put the question in an extremely ugly and offensive way.

"No, stranger, I don't think that I ever had the pleasure of meeting you before," said Perkins, endeavoring to appear at his ease, although it was apparent that he was much alarmed, and would have gladly escaped from the man if he could possibly have done so.

"Now you want to take a durned good look at me so you will be able to know me ag'in the next time you run up ag'in me!" the other announced, in an extremely ugly way. "I am a bad man, I am, and when I raise up on my hind legs and howl I wade in blood!" And the speaker shook his head, scowled worse than ever, and rolled his eyes around in an extremely fierce manner as he made this announcement.

Perkins grinned in a kind of ghastly way, but did not venture to say anything.

The stranger waited for a moment, as if he wanted to give time for his declaration to make a due impression, and then he went on.

"My name is Buck Hatton, and I am the Terror of Bessemer."

"I'm very glad to make your acquaintance, I am sure," Perkins hastened to say.

"That's a mighty sight of men who have been mighty darned sorry that they ever made my acquaintance," the desperado exclaimed, with another ominous scowl.

"Dear me, dear me! is that possible?" asked Perkins, affecting to be much interested.

"And you want to be keeful w'ot you say, and walk mighty straight, too, or mebbe you'll be one of the men who wished they had never been born arter they met me," the other threatened.

"Oh, I am the last man in the world to have any trouble," Perkins declared.

"Waal, I kin tell bettter 'bout that arter I git through with you. W'ot are you drinking?"

"I never take anything stronger than whisky," the other replied, with a grin at the old joke.

"Say! don't spring any more gags like that on me, or I'll have to fill you full of lead!" Buck Hatton cried, fiercely.

"'Pon my word, I meant no harm!" Perkins protested.

"Don't you say 'pon your word ag'in, or I'll plug you fer keeps, right off!" the other cried, angrily. "You ar' lying, and you know that you are lying, and you mustn't come any such games on me, 'cos I won't have it."

"Oh, yes, of course, that is all right," Perkins replied, decidedly uneasy, for he saw that the desperado was disposed to pick a quarrel with him if he possibly could.

"No it ain't all right—it is all wrong!" Buck Hatton cried. "I'm a gentleman, I am, and I want you to treat me as sich."

"Certainly, of course!"

"Barkeeper, set up the whisky, and I want the best in the house, too, mind! Don't you go for to try for to poke any lung-p'ison on me, for I won't have it!" And the ruffian scowled at the bartender.

That worthy, though, was used to dealing with just such customers, and did not take any notice of his offensive way.

"Whisky, there you are, colonel, four bits!" and as a matter of precaution the bartender held on to the bottle, waiting for the production of the money.

"It's this gentleman's set-up!" the desperado exclaimed in a lofty way, nodding to Perkins.

"You ax me to drink with you, if I don't dismember."

"Oh, yes, certainly, of course!" the fat man exclaimed, endeavoring to look cheerful, although he was extremely disgusted at being thus imposed upon.

"Four bits! here you are!" and Perkins flung a coin on the counter.

The barkeeper let go of the bottle and took the money, then hurried to the other end of the counter to wait upon some more customers.

The desperado filled both glasses to the brim, much to the consternation of Perkins, who was not used to swallowing his liquor by wholesale.

"When you drink, take a big drink!" that is my motto!" Buck Hatton announced. "Now, then, toss off yer licker at a single swallow like a man!"

"I—well, really, I'm afraid that I can't do that—the fact is, I am an awful slow drinker," Perkins declared, getting very red in the face. He knew what he could do in the drinking line, and was sure that if he attempted to drain the glass at a swallow, that the fiery liquor would surely gag him.

"Oh, lemme show yer!" then Buck Hatton emptied his glass at a single gulp, and smacked his lips as though the vile stuff was the nectar of the gods.

"That is the licker to warm the cockles of a man's heart!" he cried. "Now, then, throw the fluid in, you durned fat galoot!"

Perkins, dreadfully afraid of angering the ruffian, took up his glass, but he had become nervous, and his hand trembled so that he spilt a third of the liquor.

This immediately excited the wrath of the Terror.

"W'ot are you 'bout, you durned white-livered, no-souled galoot?" he roared. "Do you s'pose that ar' licker is only fit for to sprinkle the floor? By the everlasting hills! I've a good mind to make you git away with a hull bottle!"

"It was an accident, I assure you!" Perkins protested, getting more and more nervous.

"To blazes with sich accidents!" Buck Hatton growled. "You did it on purpose, and you know you did, you darned old porpoise!"

"I assure you upon my sacred honor that I had no intention of spilling the liquor!" Perkins declared. "I have too much respect for good whisky to waste it in any such way."

"Waal, toss off w'ot you've got and then we will have another howl!" the ruffian ejaculated. "Tain't often that I am willing to take two drinks with the same man, but you are so durned pressing in your invitation that I am going to go you! Swaller the licker now!"

Perkins obeyed the command, although it was as much as he could do to get the fiery fluid down, and it brought tears to his eyes.

"Now, barkeep, waltz that bottle along this way ag'in!" the Terror commanded.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE SILVER SHARP INTERFERES.

By this time the Silver Sharp had made up his mind to take a hand in the game.

He saw that the Terror was determined to quarrel with Perkins, and he thought that it was a shame that a quiet, peaceable man should be abused, and then there was another reason too which impelled him to come to the rescue of the fat cowboy.

Perkins was no stranger to the Silver Sharp, and therefore for old acquaintance' sake he felt compelled to interfere.

"My disguise is so perfect that the chances are a thousand to one that he will not recognize me," the Silver Sharp soliloquized as he rose from his seat and entered the saloon. "Anyway I must run the risk for I cannot content myself to sit quietly by and see an old acquaintance abused by any such miserable ruffian as this Terror."

The Silver Sharp walked straight up to the bar and stepped right in between the two men.

The barkeeper was just placing the bottle of whisky upon the counter in obedience to Buck Hatton's demand.

"Well, gentlemen, I don't care if I do join you!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed in the most affable manner. "It is not often that I drink, but when I do it is just about this time of day, and I always make it a point to take my poison in the society of gentlemen."

And then looking the Terror full in the face the sport smiled as if he felt perfectly sure of a welcome, at the same time extending his hand toward the bottle of whisky, which the bartender kept a firm hold of, for he had not yet seen the color of the money which was to pay for this round of drinks.

Buck Hatton was so much astonished that for a moment he stared at the Silver Sharp open-mouthed.

"Waal, darn my cats!" he finally exclaimed when he recovered the use of his tongue. "If this don't beat all! Say! who the blazes are you anyway?"

"Why is it possible that you don't know me?" the Silver Sharp asked, affecting to be much astonished.

"Know you? no, not by a jugful!" the other responded, angrily.

"Is that so, now? Well, there must be a big mistake somewhere."

"Yes, I reckon thar is, and you're the galoot w'ot has made it," the bully declared, with an ugly scowl.

"Is that so?" the Silver Sharp asked, in a mocking way.

"You will find that it is so before you ar' many min'tes older if you don't take yourself out of this in a hurry!" Buck Hatton cried, doubling up his fist and shaking it at the sport.

"Oh, no, I'm going to take a drink with you, you know."

"Not much!" Terror declared, emphatically.

"Oh, yes, I am! You are just the kind of man that I like to stick for a drink!"

"By the everlasting hills! you won't stick me for no drink!" the other yelled, in a frightful rage at the impudence of the sport. "And I give you fair warning that if you don't git out of this in two ways of a dog's tail, I will jest chaw you right up!"

"Is that a fact? Have you got the papers to show for it?" the Silver Sharp queried, as cool as a cucumber.

By this time the altercation had attracted the attention of everybody in the saloon, and all were eagerly listening to the discussion.

The majority of the men in the place were acquainted with the fact that the sport had succeeded in hammering the He Wolf of Laramie without being much troubled to accomplish the feat, and they were chuckling in their sleeves at the "surprise party" which awaited the lanky bully if he attempted to fight the Silver Sharp.

It was the general impression that there was a "picnic" ahead which would throw the He Wolf of Laramie affair completely in the shade.

Although Buck Hatton had no suspicion that the gentlemanly sport, who was chaffing him so coolly, amounted to anything as a warrior, yet as he could see from the style of his costume that he was a sport, and as sports usually are able to take care of themselves in a case of this kind, he hesitated about proceeding to an attack; yet, as far as he could see, the other did not have his hand on a weapon, nor were there any weapons visible upon his person, although the bully had no doubt that the other had them somewhere about his clothes all the same.

Now the Terror was not noted for being quick "on the draw," and as he was well aware of this fact he was wary about how he proceeded, for he did not want the other to get "the drop" on him.

If he could induce his man to meet him in a fist fight he had no doubt he could conquer him without any trouble.

"See hyer! I've slapped many a man across the jaw for a heap sight less talk than you have given me!" he declared.

"Why don't you try it on me?" the Silver Sharp inquired. "I am right here to be slapped, if you think that you are able to do the slapping."

By this time the barkeeper thought that he ought to say something.

"Gentlemen, if thar's going to be any trouble, won't you have the kindness to walk out into the street?" he exclaimed.

"This hyer saloon is no place for a scrapping match, but when you git out into the street you kin fight over the hull town if you like, and nobody will hinder ye."

"Do you dar' to come out of doors and stand up ag'in me in a fair and square fight?" the Terror demanded.

"If that is what you want I reckon I am just the man that you are looking for!" the Silver Sharp answered.

"Come on then!" and the big fellow made a movement toward the door. "And I want to give you fair warning, so as not to take you by surprise, that I am going to warn you as you never was warned afore in your life!"

"Well, sir, if you can fight half as well as you can blow, you must be away up at the top of the heap," the Silver Sharp retorted.

"You'll find out w'ot kind of a man I am arter I hit you one or two cracks!" Buck Hatton cried as he marched through the door. The Silver Sharp was close behind him, then came Perkins and the other men in the saloon, and as the boasting words of the Terror came to their ears, those in the crowd who had witnessed the contest between the Silver Sharp and the He Wolf of Laramie thrust their tongues into their cheeks and exchanged knowing looks.

In their opinion this was going to be another case of the man who went for wool and returned shorn.

Buck Hatton proceeded to the center of the street, then faced about and "squared off" at his opponent.

"Come on now—come right up to the scratch if you want to git everlastingly pulverized!" the lanky fellow cried.

"Oh, I am here all right," the Silver Sharp responded as he stepped forward.

"I kinder feel a leetle bit of pity for you, seeing that you have got into this hyer thing without knowing that you were a-barking up ag'in' a human cyclone, and if you have a mind to



spit out the proper kind of an apology, mebbe I would look over the matter," the bully announced.

"Aha! trying to crawl out of it now, are you?" the sport exclaimed in a tone of supreme contempt.

"Crawl out of it!" Buck Hatton fairly howled in his rage, "wa-al I reckon not! Wot kind of a galoot do you take me for, anyway?"

"I take you to be one of those big ruffians who abuse the strength which Heaven has given them and, thanks to their natural powers, try to tyrannize over men weaker than themselves."

"Aha! you talk like a reg'lar gospel sharp, don't ye!" the Terror cried with a sneer. "Mebbe you are a preacher-man in disguise come to this hyer town to convert us poor sinners!"

"Well, although I cannot justly lay claim to being anything of that kind, yet I reckon I will kind of convert you before this little affair is ended," the Silver Sharp replied.

"Convert me?" the lanky fellow exclaimed, vastly astonished.

"Yes, that is what I said."

"I reckon you will have the toughest kind of a time!" Buck Hatton cried with a sniff of contempt.

"Oh, no, I do not think so."

"Wa-al, by all odds you are the cheekiest galoot that I ever struck!" the other declared.

"I reckon I wasn't behind the door when cheek was given out."

"No, you kin bet on that, every time! But this hyer converting business is wot gits me!" the lanky fellow added. "And, darn my cats! if I see how you ar' going to work it!"

"You don't?"

"Nary time."

"You are dull of apprehension."

"Wot's that? Why in thunder don't you talk plain United States so a man can understand wot you are driving at?" Buck Hatton exclaimed in disgust. "You couldn't spit out any more big words if you had swallowed a Dictionary!"

"Oh, you are a dull brute and no mistake!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed, contemptuously.

"I'll brute you in about two wags of a dog's tail!" the Texan cried, brandishing his big fists in the air.

"You think that you are a bad man?"

"I reckon I am—the worst you ever struck!"

"That is your opinion?"

"You bet."

"Now I am going to convert you to the belief that you are not half so bad as you think you are," the Silver Sharp announced. "In place of being a Terror I am going to show you that you are a regular lamb of a man—one of the kind who would rather run than fight any day!"

This announcement not only took Buck Hatton completely by surprise but made him frightfully angry.

"Oh, I'm a runner am I?" he cried in a rage. "Wa-al, we'll see about that, so just look out for yourself for I'm a-coming for ye!"

And, suiting the action to the word, he made a rush at the Silver Sharp intending to batter him down with a couple of heavy blows.

Not an inch did the other give, but easily parrying the clumsy "round-arm" blows of the other, he nailed the Terror with a straight right-hander between the eyes which brought the lanky fellow up standing and made him see more stars than he had ever before beheld at one time.

Profiting by the advantage he had gained the Silver Sharp dealt his antagonist an awful lick in the region of the heart which called forth a grunt of pain from the Terror, and then, as the effect of the blow caused the other to project his head, the sport swung his right in on the neck, catching the lanky fellow full on the jugular vein and knocking him over backward.

Down went the Terror, sprawling on the ground, amid the yells of the delighted crowd.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE TERROR IS SATISFIED.

It is safe to say that a more astonished man than the Terror of Bessemer after this little passage of arms never struck the town of Sand Creek.

It was the old story over again.

Buck Hatton was utterly ignorant of even the first principles of the boxer's art, and in his previous battles he had contended with men who knew no more about boxing than himself.

Now, for the first time in his life, he came in contact with a scientific fighter, one who was not only able to hit him when and where he liked, but knew exactly how to put in his blows where they would do most damage.

When the Terror struck the ground he was a whipped man, and he had sense enough to know it.

His head felt as if it was about as big as a bushel basket, and the awful blow he had received in the region of the heart made him sick.

It was a couple of minutes before he felt able to get up.

The crowd stopped yelling when the Terror began to rise, all of them eager for more "fun."

But Buck Hatton was not disposed to furnish any more amusement for the crowd, and after

getting on his feet he did not attempt to advance on his foe, but placed his arms upon his hips and looked at him with an expression of wonder on his disfigured countenance.

"Well, how do you like it as far as you have got?" the Silver Sport inquired, sarcastically.

"By the everlasting hills! I reckon you are right 'bout one thing," the Terror replied.

"And that is that you are not half so bad a man as you believed yourself to be, eh?" asked the sport.

"That is it, for sure!"

"I told you that I would convert you, but I will admit that I did not expect to accomplish it quite so quick. I reckoned that you would be good for a couple of rounds anyway."

"I s'pose you are one of them prize-fighting galoots, ain't yer?" the lanky fellow queried, surveying the other with a deal of curiosity.

"No, I am not a prize-fighter, although I reckon that if I had to come to it I could manage to hold my own in the ring."

"I believe yer!" Buck Hatton cried in a tone of conviction. "Darn my cats! if I don't think that you kin hit about as hard as a mule kin kick!"

The crowd laughed heartily at this declaration.

"Oh, you fellers kin haw, haw, all ye like," the Terror exclaimed with an angry glance at the laughers. "I mean wot I say. I was kicked by a mule once, and I reckon I had about as lief have a mule h'ist me as to stand up and be punched by you ag'in."

"You are perfectly satisfied then, and don't want any more out of the same shop?" the Silver Sharp asked.

"No, sir-ee!" the Terror responded emphatically. "You kin keep it for some galoot wot hasn't got as much good, hard, boss sense as I have. I am through with you, I am! You are the chief, and I am willing to take a back seat. I didn't reckon that no man of your inches could do it, but you have, and that is all thar is to it."

"If you are not satisfied with your little experience, I am willing to accommodate you in any other way," the Silver Sharp remarked. "Perhaps you are better with a gun than with your fists?"

"Oh, yes, I hold that I am away up when it comes to a gun," Buck Hatton replied. "But for all that I am not going to give you a chance at me."

"Well, I reckon that you are pretty well satisfied then," the other remarked.

"Yes, satisfied that I don't stand no show with you, and I am not the kind of a man to buck ag'in a sure thing if I know it. So long. I've got all of this town that I want, and I am going to git out!"

And then the lanky fellow retreated.

The crowd jeered a little, but the beaten bully did not take any notice of the taunts, only hurried away as fast as possible.

About the most delighted man in the throng was Perkins, the fat cowboy.

"My friend, will you do me the honor to give me your hand?" he exclaimed to the Silver Sharp after the departure of the Terror. "You have got me out of an awful scrape, for I most assuredly would have had trouble with that ruffian if you had not so nobly interfered."

"Certainly, I will be glad to shake hands with you," the sport responded, giving his hand to the other, who shook it warmly.

"I feel that I owe you a debt which it will be hard work for me to pay, beggar that I am!" the fat cowboy exclaimed in a decidedly theatrical manner.

"Oh, no, it does not amount to anything. Don't mention it," the Silver Sharp replied. "I felt sure, right from the beginning, that the man was one of those big blowbards that are so common in the frontier towns. One of the fellows who is always boasting of what a dangerous man he is, and how people better mind what they are about when he is around, but when such men are brought up to the scratch they seldom prove to be half as dangerous as they are supposed to be."

"I am your debtor, and your pean is written where every day I turn the pages to read!" Perkins declared, in his odd, peculiar way.

"Oh, that is all right!" the Silver Sharp replied, carelessly. "Don't let it trouble you any. I couldn't bear to see the fellow swelling around when I knew that he was a great deal like a baboon, more gas than anything else, and so I took a hand in the affair."

"Be your motive what it may, it matters not; the service to me was performed just the same," Perkins declared. "And while memory holds a seat in this distracted brain I shall not forget your kindness. Will you come in and have a drink with me?"

"Yes, I don't mind if I do, although I am not a drinking man."

"Well, I am, worse luck!" Perkins declared, with a melancholy shake of the head. "If it was not for an unfortunate failing that I have in that way I would not be out in this region today."

"Then you ought to let liquor alone," the sport suggested.

"Oh, I do not patronize the flowing bowl as I

used to. I am not a slave to it now," the other explained.

"That is good."

"Yes, and now too I drink nothing but ale; of course I had to take the whisky when that big ruffian compelled me, but I would not have done so if I could have avoided it."

"Oh, yes, I understand that. It was Hobson's choice with you."

"Exactly, I had no choice at all."

During this conversation the pair had been progressing toward the hotel, and at this point they entered the house and proceeded to the bar.

A couple of glasses of ale were called for and disposed of, and then one of the cowboys who had witnessed both of the Silver Sharp's contests and was a great admirer of the sport insisted upon standing treat and included all in the room in the invitation.

The sport understood that he was in for a drinking bout unless he put his foot down, so he said:

"I am very much obliged to you, sir, for the high opinion which you evidently have of me and I will take just one glass of ale with you, and then you must excuse me."

It was plain that the Silver Sharp meant what he said, so, after the ale was drank his admirers did not press him to drink any more.

The sport returned to his former seat in front of the hotel, and Perkins, following, helped himself to a chair and sat down by his side.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE COWBOY'S STORY.

THERE were only two chairs on the outside of the hotel, so there wasn't any chance for anybody else to sit down.

There were a few loungers who hung around for some minutes and stared at the Silver Sharp as though he was some monstrosity, and they expected to see him exhibit himself.

The sport paid no attention to these stares, but after Perkins was seated, he inquired if he smoked, and being answered in the affirmative, drew a couple of cigars from his pocket and tendered one to the cowboy.

Then the two lit their cigars and smoked in silence.

The loungers soon came to the conclusion that there wasn't anything to be made by loitering in the neighborhood, and departed.

"I thought those fellows would get tired of standing and gaping," the sport remarked, as the last one took himself off.

"To endure the gaze of a gaping crowd of idiots is the fate of greatness," Perkins remarked.

"Well, I must be a great man then, for these fellows have stared at me as though I was a monster with two heads," the sport remarked.

"You have proved yourself to be a champion, and the man who can knock out his fellow-men ranks as a hero nowadays."

"Yes, that is true, not only in the wilds of the West, but in the highly civilized East. Wise men say that this is the age of brains, but to my thinking muscle still holds its own pretty well."

"That is so!" Perkins declared. "You never said truer words in your life. The victorious general and the champion prize-fighter pose on the same platform, and it is a doubtful question as to which excites the most interest in the crowd. Man, after all, despite his polish and education, is very much of an animal."

"You are about right there, I reckon."

"By the way, would you mind favoring me with your name," Perkins asked abruptly, but with vast politeness.

"Certainly not. Ben Silver is my handle, but as I am something of a sport, and this region is greatly given to nick-names, I am more often called the Silver Sharp than by my own proper appellation."

"The Silver Sharp, eh?"

"Yes, that is the handle the boys bestowed on me."

"Well, I should rise to remark that it is a very good one indeed."

"Good or bad, it seems to stick to me tightly enough," the other replied.

"Yes, it is strange how a nick-name of that kind will cling to a man," the cowboy remarked, in a reflective way. Then he looked carefully around him as if to be certain that there wasn't any one near enough to overhear what he was about to say.

There was no cause for anxiety on this point, for there were no loungers in the neighborhood.

Then Perkins in a low, cautious tone, remarked:

"You are not a Westerner, but from the East, I take it?"

There was a look of surprise on the sport's face as he answered:

"Well, I have been in the East, but I was born in the West and brought up there."

"You were in New York a year or so ago, though?"

"Yes, you are right in regard to that. I was in New York about that time."

"I thought I had not made a mistake, although this disguise of yours is so perfect, that it took



me some time to make up my mind whether I really knew you or not."

"Haven't you made some mistake?" the Silver Sharp asked, a puzzled expression upon his face.

"Oh, no, no mistake."

"I do not believe that you ever saw me in New York."

"Oh, yes, I did; and although you may not remember me, I certainly do remember you."

"No, no, I reckon not."

"Now, my dear friend, don't run away with the idea that I am going to repay the service that you have done me to-day by interfering in your schemes in any way," Perkins hastened to say. "On the contrary, I am desirous of doing all in my power to aid you, and I should not be at all surprised if I could manage to be useful to you."

"Well, I don't exactly see how that can be," the Silver Sharp remarked.

"Oh, yes, I feel sure that I can be of service to you!" Peterkins declared, positively. "You are up to some little game, of course; you would not be out here and rigged up in this way if you were not."

"I suppose it will be a waste of time to argue with you on this point since you are so certain about the matter," the sport remarked, laughing as though he thought the matter was a good joke.

"Yes, that is where the old lines come in: 'a man convinced against his will is of his own opinion still.'"

"Rather illogical, still extremely true."

"Now, I don't wonder that you do not remember me, for I was not brought intimately in contact with you, but if I give you a slight sketch of my life perhaps I may be able to recall myself to your memory."

"Possibly so."

"The name under which I travel is Perkins, Jeremy Perkins, and that is my true baptismal appellation."

"It certainly does not sound like an assumed name."

"No, it is too matter-of-fact and commonplace for that, and I do not doubt that you never heard the name of Jeremy Perkins before."

"I never did."

"The Perkins family is one of the oldest in New England; I belong to the Bay State branch, my eyes having first seen the light in the old town of Newburyport, where I grew to man's estate."

"I received a good education, and my honored father, who kept one of the largest stores in the town, had hopes that I would follow in his footsteps and become a successful tradesman."

"In an evil hour, though, when I was a half-grown boy, he was tempted to send me to a boarding-school to complete my education."

"The school was only a few miles from Boston, and my fellow students soon made me acquainted with the delights of the drama, and the usual result happened. I became stage-struck, and my whole ambition was to become a great actor. When I returned home after completing my term at the school, and, in the innocence of my heart made my determination known to my only parent, there was a terrible row."

"Yes, that was natural; your father must have been disgusted."

"He was perfectly horrified! The old gentleman had never been inside a theater in his life, and in his opinion play-actors were the devil's own children, and the upshot of the matter was that I took French leave of my home one night—bolted between two days, as the saying is, and joined a traveling theatrical company, with some of the members of which I had become acquainted in Boston. Behold me then fairly launched on a theatrical life!"

"Well, how did you like it?"

"First rate! Only I have made the discovery that I couldn't play the characters which it was my ambition to assume."

"Was that so?"

"Yes, like the most of young men who pine for an actor's life I fondly imagined that I could one day electrify the world in Romeo, Hamlet and such like characters."

"Ah, I see; natural, I suppose."

"Yes, but it did not take me long to discover that both my face and figure were against me; for even then I was short and fat, and audiences have a prejudice against short and fat heroes."

"Undoubtedly!"

"All that I was suitable for was either low comedy or old men. Ah, there was a check to proud ambition!" the other declared in his absurd, theatrical way.

"You were very much disappointed undoubtedly."

"My dear friend, it pretty nearly broke my heart, but the passion for a theatrical life was so strong that it even survived such a humiliation, and I stuck to the profession. My father felt so bitter that he utterly cast me off and had notified me that even if I gave up the stage I need expect nothing from him, so you see it was root hog or die!"

"And you rooted?"

"Yes, to the best of my ability. Well, to make a long story short I stuck to acting and went through all the ups and downs of a profes-

sional life. Years passed on, I did not succeed in making a hit in anything, and settled down into the life of an actor who was considered to be a useful man, but one who would never manage to set the river on fire."

"A little over a year ago I got an engagement with the Bolosso brothers. They were going to bring out a show-piece at Niblo's Garden, New York and I was engaged to do one of the small parts. The name of the play was Lagodere. It was Paul Feval's old Duke's Motto reproduced under a new title," and the speaker looked at the sport in an inquiring way.

"Yes, I think I have seen the drama," the Silver Sharp remarked.

"It strikes me very forcibly that the odds are big that you have," the other observed with a sly wink.

"We had an excellent company and the play was presented in good style. We opened on a Tuesday night, the Monday being taken up with a grand dress rehearsal of the piece, and during the rehearsal at the end of the prologue a most exciting event happened which was not down on the bills of the play."

"One of the scene-shifters made an attempt to assassinate our leading man, Mr. Mortimer, by shooting him from the wing with a revolver."

"An actress, a Miss Hilda Serene, who played the Princess, had her attention attracted to the man and she prevented the murder. She knocked the man's hand up as he fired, then grabbed the fellow, although he was a good-sized powerful customer, dragged him onto the stage and when he showed fight knocked him out with a single blow as cleverly as any professional pugilist could have done."

"Well, now, that was quite a feat I should say," the Silver Sharp remarked, coolly puffing away at his cigar.

"It was most beautifully done, and, thanks to her, the fellow was captured. After a short time Miss Serene resigned from the company and disappeared, no one seeming to know what had become of her, but from what I heard afterward I became satisfied that she did not leave the city as everybody suppose, but quitted the stage to become a detective."

"That was strange."

"Not at all; she had rare talents in that line, being one woman picked out of about a million!" Perkins asserted. "She was more like a man than a woman; very masculine in her appearance and when dressed in male attire no one would ever suppose that she was not a man. Then she was a magnificent boxer, as strong as a lion, and did not seem to know the meaning of the word fear."

"Quite a remarkable character," the Silver Sharp observed, gravely.

"Yes, and in my description I am not stretching the truth at all, merely delivering a plain, round, unvarnished tale," the other declared.

"The attempted assassination of Mr. Mortimer was a great mystery until it came out that he was one of the heirs to a great fortune and some rascals were attempting to get rid of all the heirs so that they might get the money."

"It all came out at last and Mortimer got his share of the estate, and from what he confided to me once I am satisfied that he owed it all to this Miss Serene whose skill in the detective line baffled the rascals, and finally landed them all in jail."

"A marvelous woman!" the sport observed.

"Yes, truly so. As it happened, after this affair came to an end I quitted the stage. My father relented, hunted me up and said if I would give up my stage life, return to Newburyport, settle down and take charge of his business, he would forgive the past. I consented, but the old gentleman, a little doubtful about me, insisted upon my banishing myself to the West for a year, on probation as it were, and that accounts for my presence here. I am allowed so much money to live on, and I assumed this cowboy rig and have done a little in that line just to pass the time away."

"Yes, I see," the Silver Sharp responded, in an absent way, evidently in a brown study.

"Now, I have gone to the trouble of relating this old-time tale so as to define my position," Perkins explained. "Of course no one of my stage associates would recognize the name of Jeremy Perkins, for when I went on the stage with my eager gaze fixed on Romeo, Hamlet and the other high-flyers, I knew very well the public would never believe that any man bearing such a name as Jeremy Perkins could play the romantic heroes of the drama, so I called myself Julian St. George, and as Julian St. George I was known while I remained on the boards, but now that I am off I have sunk back into plain Jeremy Perkins again."

"Yes—yes," the other said, still deep in thought.

"You understand now that I was in New York at a certain time, and occupied at a certain place, so that it was possible that certain information could come to me," Perkins remarked. "Now, I have made myself known to you because the idea came into my head that I might be of use to you. The lion and the mouse over again, you know. You remember the fable how the lion got into the snare, and the mouse nibbled the cords and set him free."

The other nodded.

"Not that I mean to infer that you are in any snare, or in danger of falling into one. Oh, no; far from it; but while you play the lion and carry out a bold game, I might do the sneak act, to use the thieves' argot, and be of some use to you."

"Understand, dear friend," Perkins hastened to add, "you are not called upon to accept my assistance if it is your judgment that I will not be of any use to you."

"Of course you know best what kind of a game you are playing, and whether I can be of assistance to you or not. If you cannot use me, all well and good! You can depend upon my being as silent as the grave in regard to yourself. Your secret will be perfectly safe with me."

"Well, old fellow, perhaps I can use you, and if so I shall be glad of your aid. I will see what I can do in a day or two."

"All right," Perkins responded. And then the approach of some cowboys put an end to the conversation.

## CHAPTER XX.

### "WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK."

It is two weeks from the day that the races took place at Sand Creek.

During that interval nothing of any particular interest concerning any of the characters of our story transpired.

The Silver Sharp still remained in the town; he professed to be satisfied that there was a good opportunity for investments in the neighborhood, and he confided to the landlord of the hotel, and some other acquaintances he had made, that he was tired of traveling around, and thought of settling down.

He said in his easy, careless way, so utterly devoid of anything like boasting, that his words were not doubted, that he had done pretty well in his line of business so far, and as he had always been a prudent careful man, who put his money away, and did not waste it in any foolish manner, he was well fixed to invest in any good speculation which promised to pay well.

Of course there were plenty of people in and around the town who felt sure that they had just the piece of property that the genial sport wanted, and so nearly every day the Silver Sharp was off on a trip, examining property.

The town felt honored when it became known that the sport intended to invest and settle down in the neighborhood.

As the landlord declared to a circle of his chums:

"I tell you what it is, gen'lmen, a man like this hyer Ben Silver is a credit to any town! Jest look back, gen'lmen, and see how he knocked out the He Wolf of Laramie and the Terror of Bessemer, and he didn't half try, either. No, sir-eel didn't half try! I've got money right hyer in my pocket w'ot says he kin do it with one hand any time."

And as this was the general opinion, no one disputed the landlord's words.

The fact that the sharp remained in town after all the rest of the sporting fraternity, who were attracted by the races, had departed, occasioned no remarks therefore.

We must qualify the statement in regard to all the sports shaking the dust of Sand Creek from their feet, for there was one besides the Silver Sharp who remained in the town, and this was Billy Hudson, Champagne Billy.

He had made the Silver Sharp's acquaintance and he purposely stayed over a day after the races ended just to see what the stranger was made of, as he said.

"It is kinder like dog eat dog for two sharps like us for to play together," he remarked after inviting the Silver Sharp to try a little "quiet game of draw." "Still, as there isn't any pigeons around, and the time will be apt to hang heavy on our hands, we might as well have a little game to make the minutes glide away."

"Oh, that is all right," the Silver Sharp responded. "I had just as lief play with hawks as pigeons; and in fact, although there may not be as much profit in the game, yet there is a deal more excitement."

"Yes, there is no doubt about that," Champagne Billy observed, mentally calculating that in the other it was likely he had met a foeman worthy of his steel.

Really, you know, when you come right down to the facts in the case, I think I had a deal rather win the money of a man like yourself, who plays a first class game, than to collar the ducats of some unfortunate wretch who ought to be put into a lunatic asylum the moment he touches a card."

"Yes, I suppose so," Champagne Billy observed, slowly, rather taken aback by this cool assumption on the part of the other that he was going to come out the winner in the contest.

After a moment, though, the old sport rallied and added:

"You are quite welcome to my ducats, you know, if you are able to beat me."

"Oh, yes, of course; I didn't suppose that you were going to make me a present of the money. I wouldn't give a snap for it if I couldn't have the pleasure of beating you out of it."

"Ah, yes, I see," and Champagne Billy men-



tally registered the conclusion that the Silver Sharp was about the coolest man that he had ever met.

The two tried each other's skill that night, and although Champagne Billy bore the reputation of being as good a short-card player as there was in Wyoming, yet he found that his antagonist was fully his match.

When the game ended that night the Silver Sharp was a hundred dollars ahead.

Although the two players were very equally matched, yet luck favored Ben Silver, and so he was enabled to win.

"You will give me my revenge, of course?" Champagne Billy remarked, greatly put out by the result, not that he cared for the money, but he was annoyed at his defeat.

"Oh, yes, certainly."

Champagne Billy came for his revenge on the following evening, and the result was that he lost another hundred, luck again being against him.

"I am not going to give it up," he remarked.

"I am out for blood!"

"All right. I am ready to accommodate you whenever you wish."

And so in the town Champagne Billy lingered, just for the sake of "getting square" with the Silver Sharp, but fortune still continued to frown on him, and by the end of the week he was over five hundred dollars behind.

It had become a most desperate duel at cards.

"I am going to get my money back or go broke!" Champagne Billy remarked to the landlord, when that gentleman inquired how the game was going.

"Yes, sir, I will stay right hyer for a month—a year if need be, until I get square or am utterly cleaned out."

"That is the way I like to hear a man talk," the landlord remarked, approvingly. "I like to see a man who is not afraid to stand up to the rack and take his fodder like a man."

"That is just the kind of a hairpin I am, and you can bet all you are worth on it!" the old sport declared.

"This sharp is a good man with the cards," he added. "I am not saying a word against the way he handles the pasteboards."

"Yes, but do you really reckon that he has been giving you a square deal?" the landlord asked, evidently suspicious, and shaking his head in a doubtful way. "I have heered some of the boys who have tried him on at keards, and come out at the leetle end of the horn, allow that he must win by some kind of a gum-game, but though they watched him in the clearest kind of way they warn't able to git on to his trick."

"Oh, that is all bosh!" Champagne Billy exclaimed, contemptuously. "The boys are not up to the mark as card-players, and that is what is the matter with Hannah! He plays as square a game as any man I ever struck, and I reckon I know what I am talking about. I have been too long in the business for anybody to pick me up for a flat."

"Oh, yes, that is so," the landlord admitted. "I reckon any man who could play any roots on you in the gambling line would have to get up extremely airy in the morning."

"Well, now, you bet er believe he would have to!" Champagne Billy remarked, in a tone of calm assurance. "Man and boy, I have been fingering the pasteboards for over forty years, and I reckon that what I don't know about card-sharping ain't worth knowing."

"Oh, I felt sart'in that that is a sure enough fact!" the landlord declared. "The proof of the pudding is in the eating, of course, and you have allers been able to hold yer own ag'in' all of them wot has tried to climb you!"

"Right you are!" the old sport exclaimed. "This hyer is the only man that I have run up ag'in' in a long time who has been able to worry me."

"Well, is he really too much for you?" the landlord asked, deeply interested.

This novel duel at cards had a fascination for him, and from the beginning he had been sure that Champagne Billy, whom he knew to be a sport from "Wayback, would succeed in cleaning out the stranger, and as it is customary in the section of which we write for a man when he makes an assertion to be willing to back it up with the solid cash, the landlord had bet with several parties that Champagne Billy would come out a winner, and therefore the old sport's defeats had cost him some money.

"No, he ain't!" the other declared, promptly. "Mark you, old pard, I am not one of the kind of men who are troubled with the big head. On a few occasions during my career I have met men who were a head and shoulders above me when it came to handling the pasteboards. Men who had a natural genius for handling cards, and who could do almost everything with the pictures except make them talk."

"Wal, I have heern tell of sich chaps, but I never met one yet," the landlord remarked.

"Oh, such men are few and far between; one man out of a million, mebber, not more," the old sport asserted.

"Well, as I said, I have met a few such men in my life, and in a mighty short time I came to the conclusion that the company was too good

for me. You see I had sense enough to know when I had got enough."

"And you don't feel that way with this sharp?"

"Nary time!"

"Although he has rowed you up Salt River for six nights now, right hand-running?"

"No, no, you are wrong there; it was the tide carried me up the stream!" the veteran sport ejaculated. "The current of luck was against me, and I couldn't make headway against it to save me. There's the hull thing in a nutshell. He is no better hand at the pasteboards than I am; I am willing to admit that I think that he is as good, but no better, and if luck had run at all even, he could not have beaten me; but it didn't!"

"Mighty strange now, when you come to think on it, that his luck should have held so steady for six days a-hand-running," the landlord observed, with a wise shake of the head.

"Strangel!" exclaimed Champagne Billy. "Well, now, you can bet all the ducats that you kin raise that it is strange. Never in all my experience have I ever met a more lucky man than this Silver Sharp; but his run of luck cannot last forever, and I am going to stick to him until it changes."

Champagne Billy was as good as his word.

He "came up smiling," as he expressed it, on the Monday night of the second week, and boldly "tackled" the Silver Sharp again.

There was another six-nights' battle.

At first it seemed as though Dame Fortune was disposed to smile upon the bold sport, but toward the end of the week the fickle jade veered about, and when the game closed on Saturday night, six hundred more dollars had gone to join the five which Champagne Billy had unwillingly contributed to help the Silver Sharp along.

"I am about down to bed-rock!" the old sport confided to the landlord, with a groan of despair at his evil fortune. "I have got enough left to buck against him for a couple of more nights, and then, if he cleans me out, the quicker I shake Sand Creek the better."

It will be seen that Champagne Billy was game.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### TAKING THE ALARM.

MRS. MAXWELL and Thomas Haverill sat in the office of the XL ranch.

Cattle Kate was reading a newspaper, and the man, seated at a desk, was looking over the books of the concern.

Short as was the time since Haverill had taken charge of the business matters of the ranch, it had been sufficient to show that he was an extra good man in that line, and although the accounts were in an extremely bad shape, yet he had succeeded in getting the books straightened out in good style.

"Well, are you about through?" Mrs. Maxwell asked, laying down her newspaper.

"Yes; there was one tangle here which bothered me a good deal; but I have got it all right now."

"How is everything? Have they been robbing me by the wholesale?"

"Oh, no, not as bad as that. The books have been badly kept, and I can see that you have paid out money which ought not to have been paid; but it is my impression that the mistakes occurred through accident, and were not designed."

"Well, I don't know about that," Mrs. Maxwell remarked with a shake of the head. "Payson, who has had charge of the books, is a good foreman and understands the cattle business as well as any man in the Territory I believe, but he does not pretend to be a bookkeeper, and said when he took charge of the books, after my husband's death, that he would do the best he could, but supposed he would be apt to make mistakes."

"That was only natural under the circumstances."

"Yes, but the idea has come to me lately that Payson's mistakes might be so arranged as to put money in his pocket," Cattle Kate observed, thoughtfully. "There are wheels within wheels, you know, and there are certain reasons why Payson might take it into his head that I have not treated him as well as he ought to be treated, and this notion might induce him to endeavor to get square with me by helping himself to some of my money."

"It may be possible, of course, that these mistakes were made on purpose, but if they were the job has been skillfully performed for there isn't anything in the books to show that he got any of the money," Haverill replied.

"Oh, Payson is a cunning fellow and a man of ability although he can't boast of much education; he is wild and reckless, an inveterate gambler, and when it came to my knowledge a little while ago that he was losing more money at cards than his salary would possibly afford, the idea came to me that he was drawing on my funds."

"Under the circumstances I do not wonder that your suspicions were aroused."

"I will do the man the justice to say that he

objected to taking charge of the books right from the beginning, and since he had them he has repeatedly asked me to get some one to take the labor off his hands."

"Well, that would seem to imply that he was not acting dishonestly with you, for if he was he would have striven to retain control of the books," Haverill remarked.

"Yes, that is true, but I can tell you that he does not like it now that the books have been taken away from him," Mrs. Maxwell asserted.

"Is that true?" Haverill asked in surprise.

"Oh, yes, I know from the way he acts that he does not like it, although he does not say anything—that is, not to me, but I have an idea that he has done some talking to the men."

"It will be apt to come to your ears in time then."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly. And then there is another reason too why Payson feels as if he had not been well treated," Mrs. Maxwell remarked, slowly. "He is an old friend of mine. I knew him in Chicago long before I ever saw Maxwell—long before I had any idea that I would ever be the mistress of a ranch. He was a gambler then, connected with a game on Clark street, not far from the variety theater where I sung, and was a regular patron of the establishment; soon after he made my acquaintance he did me the honor of falling in love with me."

"That was natural," Haverill observed with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, women who are in public life get used to men falling desperately in love with them, and I was like the rest of the variety girls; I had no objection to having a dozen or two of admirers, who could be depended upon to throw me bouquets and applaud my songs."

"Yes, of course, that was business; the more bouquets and applause you get the better salary you could command."

"Exactly, that is the point. Well, Payson was not content to worship me from afar and soon became such a devoted admirer that I was obliged to tell him that I was one of the girls who did not want to get married."

"Well, I do not wonder after the experience you had of the wedded state that you did not feel like trying it again."

"That was just what I told him in the frankest possible manner, and he was sensible enough not to take offense, so as I was not willing to receive him as a lover he became my very good friend."

"His head was level."

"Yes, and I meant what I said too; I did not believe I would ever marry again, but Maxwell came along and dazzled me with his pictures of the life which I would lead if I would only become his wife, and the first thing I knew I consented, and was married almost before I knew what I was about."

"Maxwell took you by storm."

"Yes, that was about it. Then I came out here to live, but before I left Chicago I had a talk with Payson. He did not feel at all angry with me because I had married Maxwell after refusing him, for, as he said, the rancher could offer me a much better home than he could hope to do."

"That was a sensible conclusion on his part."

"Oh, yes, Payson was always a level-headed fellow. Well, in this parting interview he told me that he had once been a cowboy and was considered good enough at the business to hold the position of foreman; he was getting tired of a gambler's life and thought he would like to get back on the frontier again, so he asked me to speak a good word for him if I heard of a chance which would be likely to suit him in the neighborhood of my new home. Well, as it happened, a month or so after I came to the ranch the foreman left and I recommended Payson to my husband."

"And he sent for him, I suppose?"

"Yes, and since that time he has been on the ranch. Now, when my husband died I have an idea that Payson thought there would be a chance for him to take his place, and one day he hinted that he had just as much liking for me as he ever had, but I quickly gave him to understand that there wasn't any chance for him. Now, I think he fancies that there is a love affair between us, and such a thing would be apt to make him ugly."

"Yes, it certainly seems as if it would have that effect," Haverill remarked, thoughtfully.

"I thought I would mention this matter to you so that you could be on your guard," Cattle Kate remarked. "Of course I don't know that Payson would play you any ugly trick but there is a chance that he might."

"I will keep my eyes open. It will not do any harm," Haverill observed. "I agree with you that under the circumstances there is a strong probability that Payson may consider himself wronged and endeavor to seek revenge."

"That is my idea."

The approach of a stranger ended the conversation at this point.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE KID TALKS BUSINESS.

THE new-comer, although a stranger to Cattle Kate and her confidential man of business, is not



so to the reader, for it was the New York cracksmen, Billy the Kid.

Through the window the pair had seen him approach, and when they finished their conversation his hand was on the door-latch.

The Kid entered in his peculiar, cat-like way, ducked his head in what he intended to be a polite bow, and then put on an affable grin.

"I hope I see you well," he began. "If I haven't made a mistake this 'ere is Mrs. Maxwell."

"That is my name," Cattle Kate replied, coldly, being unfavorably impressed by the looks of the man.

"And this 'ere is Mister Haverill, I take it," Billy the Kid said, with another grin and a duck of the head.

"You are correct," Haverill replied.

"I have come to see you on a little matter of business—very important business, I think, and it is a business which don't want to be shouted from the house-tops, you understand."

Mrs. Maxwell and Haverill looked at the man and then at each other, being a little surprised by this strange beginning.

"It is very particular business!" Billy the Kid asserted. "You can bet your life on it, and you would win, every time! And, seeing as how it is particular business, I don't want to open my potato-trap if there is danger of any coves being around to catch what I am going for to say." And then the New Yorker grinned again and winked in an extremely significant manner.

"You need not be afraid to speak," Mrs. Maxwell remarked. "There isn't any danger of any one overhearing what you say."

The office was situated in a low, one-storied L attached to the house, on the east side.

"No danger?" questioned Billy the Kid, peering around him, suspiciously.

"Not the slightest," Cattle Kate declared.

"You need not be alarmed in regard to that," Haverill remarked. "You can speak freely and with the perfect assurance that no one but us will be able to hear your words."

"I s'pose that you think now that I was giving you a ghost story when I said that I had something mighty important to say," the fellow remarked, with another grin.

"I can assure you that I did not trouble myself to think at all about the matter," Mrs. Maxwell replied. "And as to whether you have anything important to say or not, we can tell better after you have spoken."

"Right you are, and no mistake!" Billy the Kid exclaimed. "You will excuse me if I help myself to a chair," and then he sat down, looked around him cautiously again, as if he wished to satisfy himself with his own eyes that there was no eavesdropper lurking near, and finally began: "I am a stranger in this 'ere district—ain't been long in the Territory either, and I come from New York."

There was a quick exchange of glances between Mrs. Maxwell and Haverill, and then the confidential man of business studied the face of the stranger intently.

Billy the Kid was too keen an observer not to perceive the exchange of glances, also the searching look which Haverill was bestowing upon him, and he jumped to the conclusion that his words were distrusted.

"Oh, it is the honest truth I am telling you, wish I may die if it isn't!" the fellow protested.

"I don't know why you should think that we doubt the truth of your statement," Cattle Kate remarked.

"Well, I was only guessing at it of course," Billy the Kid replied. "But you kinder looked as if you thought I was lying to you."

"I am not able to see what difference it makes to either Mrs. Maxwell or myself where you come from," Haverill said. "And therefore when you say that you come from New York there is no reason why we should doubt your word."

"Well, I am from New York, although mebbe you wouldn't think so from my name, for I am known as Billy the Kid."

"That is a Western name sure enough," Mrs. Maxwell observed.

"Yes, I know that there has been a lot of other Billy the Kids in the West, but I got the name on account of my size long before I ever thought of coming out to this country," the fellow explained.

"Now, I am going to be honest with you about this 'ere matter; when I was East I wasn't on the square, but was allers open to take a trick whenever I seen a good chance, and it was my pals that gave me my name."

"It doesn't matter to us what you did in the East, nor here either, unless you try some of your games in this neighborhood," Mrs. Maxwell observed.

"That's very true, in course," Billy the Kid declared. "But I came out with the truth so you would understand just what kind of a duck I am."

"Yes, I see, but what difference does it make to us?" Haverill asked.

"Now, that is jest what I am coming to, but I am the kind of fellow that believes in laying a good foundation for to go on. First, I came from New York: that is one point; next, I have

been a crook, and up to all sorts of games, that is another point."

"You are not giving yourself a very good reputation," Mrs. Maxwell remarked.

"No, but I am telling you the truth, 'cos I want you to believe what I say, and I want you to understand that when I say a certain thing you can bet all you are worth that I know what I am talking about."

"Why don't you come to the point at once?" Haverill exclaimed, impatiently. "Why beat about the bush so long?"

"All right, I will. I s'pose if I give you any valuable information that you will do what is right about it?" Billy the Kid inquired.

"You mean that you want to be paid?" Mrs. Maxwell asked.

"Yes, for I reckon it will be worth something to you."

"We can tell better in regard to that when we learn what your information amounts to," Haverill remarked.

"Now, Mrs. Maxwell, you must not take offense at what I say, 'cos I am only repeating the talk that I have heard 'bout you and your cowboys since I came into this district," the fellow observed in an extremely humble way.

Cattle Kate's lip curled in contempt.

"It does not matter to me what people say!" she exclaimed. "I know that there are plenty of rascals ready to swap lies about me and my men, but I care no more for what they say than I do for the idle wind that blows over the prairie."

"Some folks say, you know, that there is a good many rustlers among your men, and I have heard talk 'bout a detective being hired to catch some of your cowboys."

"Oh, yes, there is a lot of people in this world who say a great deal more than their prayers!" Cattle Kate declared, scornfully.

"Well, when I heard such talk I did not take much stock in it," Billy the Kid admitted. "But one thing I know for certain now and that is there is a New York detective in the town in disguise."

"It does not make any difference to me if there were fifty New York detectives in the neighborhood!" Mrs. Maxwell declared in emphatic tones. "Nor whether they were here in disguise or in their true characters. It is all one to me, I can tell you!"

"And it is your idea, I presume, that this New York detective has been induced to come here for the purpose of making trouble for us XL Ranch people?" Haverill remarked.

"That is my idea, governor!"

"You are quite sure that you have not made any mistake about the matter? You are certain that the man is a detective?" Haverill questioned.

"Oh, yes, I am as certain as certain can be!" Billy the Kid declared, positively. "The man is one of the high-toned New York detectives, a fellow who is away up in his business—as good as they make 'em! I know it, for he got arter a gang that I was running with, and the way he busted 'em up was a caution; that was how I came to cut my lucky from New York and come out here. I was afraid this fly-cop would get after me, and I knew him well enough to think that I would be a gone coon if he started after me."

"If he was the boss of all the detectives that have existed since the world began I would defy him to trouble me!" Cattle Kate declared, evidently highly excited.

"Yes, I reckon the fellow will not be able to make much out of us," Haverill remarked in a thoughtful way.

"But is it not monstrous that any one should dare to try such a game?" Mrs. Maxwell declared, her cheeks in a flame. "The idea that any one should go to the trouble of hiring a detective to play the spy upon us! I can tell you that if I find out who is responsible for this piece of dirty work I will do all in my power to make it warm for them!"

The eyes of Cattle Kate flashed angry fires and she drew herself up like a tragedy queen as she made the declaration.

"Oh, I do not think, Mrs. Maxwell, that the man has come here to pry into our affairs at all," Haverill remarked, evidently not at all troubled about the matter. "The fellow may be a New York detective—"

"There isn't a doubt of that!" Billy the Kid declared. "I know the man and I would be willing to swear to him anywhere; his get-up as a sport does not fool me."

"Well, admitted that the man is a prominent New York detective in disguise, that does not show that he has come here with any idea of troubling his head about us," Haverill argued.

"No, I s'pose that is so," Billy the Kid admitted, scratching his head as though that process aided thought. "But you see I am one of that kind of men who put two and two together. I heard the talk 'bout how some of your neighbors, who were down on you, were going to put a detective arter you, and when I see'd this 'ere cove here, I jumped to the conclusion that his little game was to get a p'int on you."

"Ah, yes, I see," Haverill remarked. "Well, to a man like yourself, who has led a crooked life to come to such a conclusion, would be the

most natural thing in the world. It is the old story, 'the thief doth fear each bush an officer,' but I think you are away off. The man is not after us at all."

"Mebbe not," Billy the Kid replied, shaking his head in a doubtful manner. "But I kin jest tell you that if I were you, I would keep my eyes on him. Sometimes the smartest of us make big mistakes."

"Oh, yes, you are right there, undoubtedly," Haverill replied immediately. "The man who is fool enough to believe that he cannot make a mistake, gets dreadfully left sometimes. Now, I do not claim to be infallible, and it is possible that you are right and I am wrong about this man's business in this section."

"It will not do any harm to keep an eye upon him!" exclaimed Mrs. Maxwell at this point.

It seemed evident from her manner that she attached more importance by far to the matter than Haverill did.

"That is where you are wise, marm!" Billy the Kid declared. "If you keep a watch on him and he comes to try any games, you will be able to prevent him from doing any harm, mebbe."

"Oh, yes, that is advisable," Haverill observed. "I should recommend that by all means. If the man is after us, no harm will be done; if he is, then, as you say, we may be able to prevent him from doing us any mischief."

"I s'pose there isn't any harm in my putting in a good word for myself at this p'int, is there?" Billy the Kid asked, with a sly chuckle.

"Oh, no," Mrs. Maxwell replied. "If a man is too bashful to speak a good word for himself, no one else is likely to do it."

"What I was going to say is, that I would like the job of watching this cove," the cracksmen explained. "I have done a heap of work in that line in my time—keeping my eyes on coves that the gang had picked out as likely to be worth the going for—and I think I could do the thing up brown."

"Well, I do not see any reason why you couldn't do the work as well as anybody," Mrs. Maxwell remarked with a questioning glance at Haverill.

"Yes, you ought to be able to work a job of that kind all right," the superintendent coincided. "But you have not told us who the man is yet."

"It is this cove who calls himself the Silver Sharp."

Both of the others looked surprised, and their faces became serious.

"If he is a detective, and has been set upon me by my enemies, he would be the very man to make trouble," Mrs. Maxwell observed.

"Yes, there is not any doubt about that," Haverill assented. "He is an extra good man, but I will admit he is about the last person in the world whom I would have picked out for a detective."

"Oh, he is a hummer, boss, and no mistake," Billy the Kid declared. "He was a new man on the force when I ran across him in New York, but he did work that made the old hands look sick."

"Well, you can take the job of looking after him, and we will pay liberally for any information of value that you may secure," Haverill said.

"All right, boss, that is a bargain," replied Billy the Kid, rising. "And you can bet your sweet life that I will do the trick right up to the hundle."

And then he took his departure.

#### CHAPTER XXIII.

##### HAVERILL'S REVELATION.

THE pair watched the New York crook until he was lost to view in the distance, and then Mrs. Maxwell turned to Haverill and said:

"You do not seem to attach much importance to this man's disclosure?"

Haverill laughed.

"Well, as the poet says, 'I do not wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at;' that is, I am too old a hand to allow my face to betray my feelings, particularly when I am dealing with such a remarkably sharp customer as this Billy the Kid."

"Ah! then your indifference was assumed?"

"Yes, to a certain extent."

"And you think the detective has been employed by my enemies to procure proof that my cowboys have been rustling?"

"Oh, no, I do not think anything of the kind!"

Mrs. Maxwell was amazed by the denial.

"I do not understand," she exclaimed. "I thought you meant that you were afraid that this detective was here on business."

"So I am, but I do not believe that that business concerns you at all," Haverill replied.

"You are speaking in riddles—explain!"

"I will, but first I will ask you a question."

"I'll answer it, of course—if I can," Mrs. Maxwell declared, promptly.

"You have been kind enough to place considerable confidence in me, and from the way you have treated me I am vain enough to believe that you have a good opinion of my humble self."

"You are right, and I will be frank enough to



say that I like you better than any man that I ever saw; I cannot say much more than that, can I?" And Cattle Kate extended her hand to Haverill.

He took it and pressed it between his own palms as he made reply:

"No indeed, and I am happy at having had the good fortune to secure your confidence," he said.

"Well, it is not any wonder when you come to look at the facts in the case. You are a gentleman, and as different from the average man in this section as daylight is from darkness. Now, although a good many people profess to turn up their noses at me, saying that I am only a variety actress, yet I have been used to the society of gentlemen, and know one when I meet him, and as for these men who talk about me, I would not have anything to do with any one of the common crowd on any account!" And Cattle Kate's lip curled in scorn as she made the avowal.

"And I am attracted to you because you are a bold and fearless woman, one after my own heart. I hate these soft, doll-like girls who do not dare to say that their souls are their own!" Haverill declared. "And now, Kate, I am going to give you the best proof in the world that I believe you have a sincere affection for me by revealing to you a secret concerning myself."

"Oh, you can trust me! Be sure of that!" the woman declared.

"Yes, I do trust you implicitly, and so I speak," Haverill replied. "You were keen-witted enough to surmise that such a man as I am would not come out to a region like this, and deliberately settle down, unless he had got into trouble in the East."

"Yes, you are right; that was my thought," Cattle Kate remarked.

"Well, it is the truth; I am a fugitive from justice, and if this New York detective is here after anybody, the chances are a hundred to one that it is a gentleman about my size."

"Is the trouble that you were in a serious one?" Mrs. Maxwell asked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, I should be apt to make the acquaintance of the hangman if the detective succeeded in taking me back East."

The face of the woman grew dark.

"In that case, then, this detective must be looked after. If it is either his life or yours, it will not be a difficult matter to decide who will become the victim!" she declared.

"Well, I may be on a false scent, of course, but I do not think I am, and if this man is a detective—I do not think there is much doubt about that, for this Billy the Kid is a sharp rascal, and one not likely to make a mistake—and is after me, and there again I think I am right, then if I do not settle him, he will be apt to settle me, for he is an extra good man. The way he handled these bullies, the He Wolf from Laramie, and the Terror of Bessemer, surely proves that."

"Be careful!" Mrs. Maxwell warned. "Here is Champagne Billy!"

The pair had been so occupied in their conversation that neither one had noticed the approach of the old sport until he was nearly at the door.

"He is just the man to give us some information about the Silver Sharp, for I understand that he has been playing cards with him regularly every night for about two weeks now," Haverill remarked.

"He has marked the stranger for a pigeon, and has been plucking him."

"No, the boot is on the other leg, I believe, for I heard to day that Champagne Billy was a heavy loser."

"That is strange, for he is counted to be one of the most successful sports in the Territory."

"He has met his master this time, if the accounts are true."

The entrance of the veteran gambler interrupted the conversation at this point.

"How are ye?" said Champagne Billy, and then he sat down in the chair which the Kid had but recently vacated.

"Pretty well! How are things with you?" Mrs. Maxwell asked.

"Running badly!" the old sport replied.

"Is that so? Well, I am sorry to hear it," Haverill declared. "I understood that you had been indulging in a little poker with this sport, who calls himself the Silver Sharp, and I was in hopes that you would be able to win a small fortune from him before you got through."

"By jinks! it is the other way!" Champagne Billy declared with a grimace. "The cuss has been cleaning me out in the worst kind of style."

"You astonish me!" Mrs. Maxwell exclaimed. "Why, I had an idea that you were a great chief when it came to poker, and that there were few men in the Territory who could beat you."

"Well, I have always managed to hold my own, and a little more too, but this man has struck into the durnest run of luck that I ever saw in all my experience. He is no better player than I am, but the best player cannot win when the cards are running against him all the time."

The others agreed to this.

"Well, you would hardly believe it but the galoot has about got me down to bed-rock!" the veteran sport declared. "I calculated to go to Bessemer after the races were over, that was over two weeks ago, but I am here still. I got into a little game with him, and as I ran behind I have been hanging on ever since trying to get square."

"It is the old story I suppose. In trying to get back what you were out, you lost more," Haverill remarked.

"You have hit it!" Champagne Billy answered with a melancholy shake of the head. "You never made a better guess in your life. Why, I s'pose you would hardly think it, but I am a thousand out on the deal!"

The others expressed their surprise at the extent of the loss.

"But I don't mind the loss of the money so much as I do to have the conceit taken out of me in this wholesale way," the old sport declared.

"It is disagreeable," Mrs. Maxwell remarked.

"You bet!" Champagne Billy exclaimed.

"You see, I kept on thinking that luck would change, but it is nary change. If I was satisfied that he was a better player than I am I would give it up—would have given it up the moment I made the discovery, but I am not convinced of that—in fact, I am certain that he isn't, but he has the durnest luck of any man that I ever stocked up against."

"Yes, but it is not possible that his run of luck will continue. It must change," Cattle Kate remarked.

"That is just what I have been banking upon, but I am beginning to believe that this sport's luck is like a brook which runs on forever."

"Nonsense!" Haverill cried. "Luck don't run in that way, and I should argue that as this sport has had such a run of good luck, the chances are big that it will soon change, and then you will be able to clean him out."

"That is just the theory that I have been going on," the old sport replied. "And the result is, as I said before, I am about down to bed-rock, and I can't tackle the fellow no more, for you cannot play poker on wind, you know."

"I will lend you a hundred!" exclaimed Mrs. Maxwell, drawing a roll of bills from an inside pocket in the bosom of her dress. "Or two hundred, if a hundred isn't enough. I suppose you will need two to play any kind of a game."

"Yes, two would be better than one," Champagne Billy replied.

"You are perfectly welcome to the money, and if you are unlucky enough to lose it you can take your own time about paying it back," Cattle Kate remarked, as she counted out the two hundred and handed the bills to the sport.

"I am very much obliged, and I will do as much for you some time," Champagne Billy declared, with a sigh of relief as he pocketed the money.

"Oh, that is all right," Mrs. Maxwell replied, carelessly. "By the way, I suppose you are about as well acquainted with the Silver Sharp as any man in the neighborhood?"

"Better, I reckon—a heap sight better, and you had better believe that I have paid mighty well for the privilege, too," and the veteran sport made a grimace.

"Well, I heard something about this man, and I made up my mind to ask you in regard to it the first chance I got. I want the thing kept quiet, of course," Mrs. Maxwell continued.

"Oh, yes, you can depend upon me, you know."

"Well, I heard a rumor some time ago that a few enemies of mine, who believe that my boys have been rustling, had determined to hire a detective, and set him to bring the rustling home to me, and a certain party told me that this Silver Sharp was a detective."

Champagne Billy looked surprised.

"Is that so?" he exclaimed.

"Well, that is what I was told," the woman replied. "Of course I don't know how much truth there is in the yarn."

"Humph!" exclaimed the veteran, in a meditative way. "I never thought of his being anything but a sport, but now you come to speak of the thing, I don't know but what there is some truth in the story."

"You think there is?" and a dark look appeared on Mrs. Maxwell's face as she put the question.

"Well, I would not go so far as to say right out that I think he is a detective," Champagne Billy answered. "For I am not at all certain about the matter. The most I would be willing to say is that it is my opinion that there is a good, big chance that he may be one."

"It does not appear at all improbable to you?" Haverill questioned.

"Oh, no!" the veteran answered, decidedly.

"He is an odd, peculiar genius for a sport. I have seen a good many sports in my time, but I never met one like this man before. He is such a quiet, easy-going fellow, with such a smooth, soft way with him, about as much like a woman as he is like a man, but when he gets a-going he is a regular tornado, as the two fellows he handled so roughly would be willing to swear, you can bet."

"Well, I have not seen much of the man, but it struck me that he was altogether different from the usual run of sports," Haverill said.

"Oh, he is, there is no mistake about that. Now he is talking about settling down and going into ranching; but, bless your heart! your true sport never settles down. He isn't that kind of a coon; your genuine sport is a bird of passage and after he has played a town for all it is worth he has no further use for it, any more than a man has for a sucked orange; after the juice is out the quicker the thing is dropped the better."

"Yes, yes, there is no doubt about that," Haverill remarked. "But isn't it rather strange that this man should be such an expert gambler if he is really a detective?"

"Oh, no; detectives are always men of the world, you know, up to all sorts of tricks, and it is not at all out of the way for one in that line of business to rank high as a card-sharp. He might have been a gambler, you see, before he went into the detective business."

"That is very true," Mrs. Maxwell observed.

"Well, I hope you will not say anything to anybody in regard to my being warned that the man is a detective, and is here with the idea of getting me into trouble," she added.

"Oh, that is all right! You can depend on me!" Champagne Billy declared. "And, in fact, I will try my hand at a little detective business myself, and see if I can't find out just what little game this Silver Sharp is up to."

"Well, I shall be very much obliged if you succeed in obtaining any information of importance," Mrs. Maxwell said.

"You can depend upon my doing the best I can for you," the veteran sport declared, as he rose to depart. "And I reckon that if the man is hyer on any leetle business of that kind, I will be able to discover it, although I have already made the discovery that he is a close-mouthed chap; one of the cunning fellows who talks apparently in the frankest manner and yet never says much of anything about himself."

"Well, I am ever so much obliged for the loan; maybe my luck will turn now."

"I hope so!" said Mrs. Maxwell and Haverill in a breath, as Champagne Billy departed.

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

##### CATTLE KATE'S SCHEME.

THROUGH the window the pair watched the veteran sport for a few minutes as he strode away from the ranch.

Both of their faces were dark—their brows wrinkled in meditation.

Mrs. Maxwell was the first to speak.

"Well, what do you think now?" she asked.

"Oh, I do not suppose that there is any doubt about the man being a detective, and in my opinion the chances are great that he is after me," Haverill replied.

"I should not be surprised if your suspicions are correct," she said. "There is not much probability that he has been engaged by my foes to worry me."

"Oh, no; your enemies would not send clear to New York for a detective to come out here for the sole purpose of proving that your cowboys do a little rustling when they get the chance, while the man who comes after me—if one does come—must come from New York," Haverill remarked, with the air of a man who was weighing all the chances.

"Yes, that is true."

"But is it not wonderful, though, how these bloodhounds of the law manage to follow on a man's trail?" Haverill exclaimed, abruptly.

"Ah, like the dogs whom they resemble they seem to be able to follow by the scent."

"And I have turned and doubled on my track, too, like a hunted fox!" Haverill cried, with bitter accent. "I went into Canada—clear up in the great Northwest region, and there took care to change my appearance so that I am sure my nearest and dearest friend would not be able to recognize me. I assumed a disguise right from the time of my flight, but I did not think that it was complete enough, and after I got into Canada, when I made up my mind to cross the border again, I resolved to make my disguise so complete as to bid defiance to recognition."

"Are we not yielding to an unnecessary alarm?" Cattle Kate questioned. "We are not sure that this man is a detective, although I do not think there is much doubt about it, but even if he is what proof have we that he is here after you?"

"None at all," Haverill answered. "Only that I know I am 'wanted,' as these detectives say, and, of course, when I learn that there is a New York bloodhound in the town it is only natural for me to jump to the conclusion that he is after me."

"And yet the chances are great that in this section there are a dozen men from the East—from New York City itself, perhaps—who are fugitives from justice, and the detective may be after one of these men."

"Oh, yes, what you say is all very true, but from the peculiar, quiet way in which the man is going to work it seems to me as if he was after big game, and then, too, was not quite



sure that he had got his man dead to rights, as the human bloodhounds say, and that makes me suspect that I am the fellow who is wanted."

"Yes, it may be so, of course," Mrs. Maxwell admitted.

"I figure the affair out after this fashion," Haverill remarked. "In some mysterious way the man-hunter got wind that I am in the neighborhood of Sand Creek. Personally I am unknown to him; all he has to go by is my description—the description of how I looked when I fled from New York, and, as I told you, I don't answer to that description now; this is what is bothering the man. He thinks I am in the neighborhood, but upon looking around he is not able to discover anybody who answers to the description of the man of whom he is in search, and he is waiting here until some favorable accident gives him a clew."

"But under these circumstances is there any danger then that he will be able to discover you?" Mrs. Maxwell asked.

"Oh, yes, it is the unexpected that always happens you know," Haverill answered. "While this man is in the town, I am like a man walking on the crest of a volcano; the crater may open at any time and swallow me."

"That is true—very true," Cattle Kate said, thoughtfully, and then she fell into a deep meditation for a few moments.

Haverill watched her.

"You are trying to think of some plan by means of which I may escape this danger," he questioned after a long pause.

"Well, no, not that exactly, but I was striving to hit upon some scheme by means of which we might ascertain just how great the danger actually is that threatens."

"That is a good idea," Haverill remarked, approvingly.

"You remember we started on the supposition that the detective was after me?"

"Yes."

"Now, I have hit upon a plan by means of which I think we can find out just what the detective is after."

"If we can do that we will gain an important point."

"This is my idea. Up on the head-waters of Sand Creek there is a lonely ranch where a man called Yellow John lives. He is a half-breed—that is he is called so, but he is Indian, Mexican and American all mixed up, and is as big a rascal as can be found west of the Mississippi."

"A fine character you are giving the fellow."

"I am only speaking the truth about him," Mrs. Maxwell declared. "He is supposed to be a rancher, but he does not keep many cattle, yet has six or eight cowboys, most of them Mexicans, Indians or half-breeds like himself."

"A gang of rustlers, I suppose."

"Yes, and men who would not hesitate to turn their hand to anything, provided a good stake could be made; but Yellow John is a shrewd fellow and is smart enough never to trouble any of his neighbors, so the ranchers who live near him do not really know just how bad the fellow is."

"Well, that is a good idea," Haverill remarked. "If he committed depredations upon his neighbors they would soon make the country too hot to hold him."

"Yes, he understands that, and so is careful to go a good distance off when engaged in a raid."

"Now, my idea is this: suppose you go to Yellow John—I will send a guide with you. He used to be one of my cowboys, but I had to get rid of him for he would persist in rustling in spite of all I could do to stop him. Engage this half-breed to capture the Silver Sharp and carry him off to some lonely retreat; Yellow John has, probably, a dozen, any one of which will answer."

"Oh, yes, in a country like this—there will not be any trouble about finding a suitable spot."

"Then, when the man is secured he is to be put through a regular cross-examination as to who he is and why he comes to this part of the country, and it can be said at the time that suspicion has been aroused in regard to his being a bloodhound in disguise, and the statement can be made that if he has come here with the idea of catching any rustlers, the quicker he gives up the scheme and gets out of the country the better it will be for him."

"Ah, yes, I see the game!" Haverill exclaimed. "That is to give him the idea that it is the cattle-thieves who have taken the alarm at his presence, and it is the rustlers who have made him a prisoner."

"Exactly! and it seems to me that the chances are a thousand to one that he will not suspect that it is not the truth."

"Oh, no; why should he?" Haverill exclaimed. "It is the most natural thing in the world for the rustlers to take the alarm the moment the suspicion got abroad that he was a detective."

"Yes, and men who follow that trade are not apt to stand upon any ceremony when they discover that danger threatens them. But there is the man I want now."

Through the window Mrs. Maxwell had caught sight of an under-sized, but thick-set fellow,

whose dark skin and peculiar features showed that he was a half-breed.

Going to the door, Cattle Kate called out:

"Hey, Pony Jim! Come here; I want you!"

"This fellow used to be one of the biggest rustlers in the Territory," she explained to Haverill. "But I warned him that he must give it up if he wanted to stay on my ranch, and he professes to have turned over a new leaf, but I have an idea that he joins Yellow John on his raids once in a while."

"Very likely," Haverill remarked. "It is not an easy matter to teach old dogs new tricks."

The cowboy came slouching into the apartment. He was a bow-legged fellow, with an evil face, a customer that a prudent man, with valuables on his person, would be apt to give a wide berth, if he was met in a lonely place on a dark night.

"Jim, do you know whether Yellow John is at home or not?" Cattle Kate asked.

"Yes, he is. I saw him yesterday," the cowboy replied.

"Were you over to his place?"

"Yes, I heard he had some cattle to sell, and I thought I would ride over and take a look at them. I reckoned, mebbe, that you might want to buy some."

"Oh, no; not from Yellow John," Mrs. Maxwell replied, with a decided shake of the head. "I don't want to have any trouble, and if I bought cattle from Yellow John, the first thing I knew there might be some anxious men here asking all sorts of impudent questions."

"Oh, no, the brands are all right!" the cowboy exclaimed, with a cunning leer. "You can trust Yellow John to look after that."

"No, no, I don't want to invest. I have all the cattle I wish at present," Mrs. Maxwell declared.

"He will give a bargain, and you need not fear that there will be any trouble. These beeves are from Utah."

"Ah, Yellow John has been down in the Mormon land, eh?" Mrs. Maxwell remarked. "Despoiling the Saints?"

"Oh, no, he traded for them!" the cowboy asserted, with a grin which gave the lie to his words.

"Yes, traded time against cattle and settled the bargain in the dark of the night," Mrs. Maxwell observed, sarcastically. "But I don't want to trade, so there is no use of wasting words about the matter; Mr. Haverill here has a little business with Yellow John though, and I want you to take him out to his ranch."

"Oh, yes, I can do that easily enough."

"You can tell Yellow John that I say he need not fear to trust Mr. Haverill, as he is perfectly square, and he can put as much faith in him as in me."

"All right! I will tell him."

"Be sure and impress upon him that Mr. Haverill represents me, and any arrangement he may make with Mr. Haverill will be carried out by me."

"Yes, yes, I will do so," the cowboy replied. "Yellow John knows that Mr. Haverill is now superintendent of the ranch, for I told him when I was over there yesterday."

"Well, good-by, Mr. Haverill, and good luck go with you!" Mrs. Maxwell exclaimed.

The men departed, went to the corral, had a couple of horses saddled, and ten minutes later were on the backs of the animals, on their way to the lonely ranch on the head-waters of Sand Creek, the abode of Yellow John, who was really the champion rustler of Wyoming Territory, although he, being a cunning rascal, managed his raids so cleverly, that few, even of his nearest neighbors, realized that two-thirds of all the cattle he sold were stolen.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### YELLOW JOHN.

It was a good three hours' ride to the ranch of the half-breed, even though the pair rode at a brisk gallop.

There was very little conversation between the two on the way, for the cowboy was a rather sullen fellow and not disposed to be talkative.

Mrs. Maxwell's refusal to buy any of Yellow John's stock evidently annoyed the man, for he spoke of it during the journey.

"Mrs. Maxwell is not wise not to jump at the chance to get these beeves!" he declared.

"She is evidently afraid that there may be some trouble about them," Haverill explained.

"Not the least danger, and she ought to know Yellow John better than to think there would be. He is too careful. Mebbe after you see the cattle you may think that it will be a good thing for her to buy some of them."

"Maybe so, but, I say, why do you take such an interest in the matter? Is Yellow John going to give you a commission if he makes a sale to XL Ranch?" Haverill asked, shrewdly.

"Oh, well, Yellow John is a good fellow, and nobody ever loses anything by putting in a word for him," the cowboy admitted.

Haverill laughed.

"It is evident that Yellow John is a cunning fellow, and knows on which side his bread is buttered," he commented.

"Oh, yes, he is no fool!"

In due time the pair arrived at their destination.

The ranch of the half-breed was indeed in a desolate and lonely spot. There was not a house within five miles, owing to the fact that the country was so broken and barren that few men would care to pitch their tents in such a locality; the ranch was situated on rising ground so that it commanded a view of the only practicable trail by which the house could be reached; therefore the approach of any one could be seen from the time that they got within three miles of the place, that is, supposing that a lookout was kept.

The cowboy pointed this out to Haverill as they approached, and explained that Yellow John kept a man constantly on the watch so that it would not be an easy matter for any enemies to surprise him.

"How about the night?" Haverill questioned.

"About two miles from the ranch the trail goes through a rocky pass, and the rocks are so steep that there ain't any way to get past the ledge except through the pass, and after the defile is left behind, the trail is so bad that it would take a good horse twenty minutes to reach the ranch," the cowboy said. "If Yellow John has reason to expect visitors who are not wanted, a man is posted on the side of the cliff on the west of the pass, and, even on the darkest night, it would not be possible for any one to follow the trail without his knowledge. The moment the party entered the pass he would know it, and after they got well into the defile a pistol-shot would warn the men at the ranch that danger was near, and then they would have twenty minutes to prepare to meet it."

"A very cunningly contrived plan," Haverill remarked. "But, I say, do you think you are wise in disclosing it? Do you think you are serving Yellow John by so doing?"

"Oh, he does not care," the cowboy replied. "He would just as lief tell you himself. It is his boast that no foe can surprise him in his ranch."

"Ah, yes, I see, but would it not be possible for a party, who knew that this sentinel was on the lookout, to capture him, and so be able to surprise the ranch?"

"No, the place where the sentinel is can only be reached from the rear, and the defile must be passed before the path could be got at."

"It is plain that Yellow John has got a head on his shoulders," Haverill remarked.

"Ah, yes, you will be sure to think so after you meet him!" the cowboy declared.

When the couple reached the ranch it was apparent that the cowboy's words in regard to the watch was correct, and that their coming had been noticed, for Yellow John was in readiness to receive his visitors.

The ranchman was a peculiar-looking fellow; he was tall for a half-breed, straight as an arrow, and well built, although weak in the legs, which were not developed in proportion to the rest of his form; this was owing to his having from early boyhood spent so much time on the back of a horse. Your true ranchman never walks if he can possibly avoid it.

Yellow John's complexion accounted for his name, for, unlike the majority of the half-breeds, it was more yellow than red, or copper-color.

His hair was jet black, as were also his eyes, and both hair and eyes betrayed Mexican blood, for the first curled in little crispy ringlets all over his head, and the second were small, and so very dark in hue as to suggest jet beads.

The rancher was dressed after the usual cowboy fashion, only rather fancifully; his broad-brimmed sombrero, for instance, never cost less than twenty dollars, and his high riding-boots were made of extra fine leather, and had heels an inch and a half high.

As the pair drew rein in front of the ranch the master of the establishment advanced to meet them, while some of the cowboys who were lounging about came forward to take charge of the horses.

There were six cowboys in all present, and as Haverill cast his eyes over them the thought came to him that never in all his experience of mankind had he seen six more hangdog-looking fellows.

"You are welcome, gentlemen," Yellow John exclaimed, politely, and from the way he spoke, and his manner, it was evident that he was no common, vulgar ruffian. "I am truly glad to see you. Alright, gentlemen."

"This is Mr. Haverill, the new superintendent of the XL Ranch," the cowboy explained, as he dismounted, his companion following his example.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Haverill," Yellow John exclaimed, shaking hands with the other as warmly as though he was the dearest friend he had in the world. "I was in a measure prepared for your coming for some of my men recognized you."

"I am happy to see you, sir," Haverill replied. "I have come on a little matter of business, and should like to have the pleasure of a private interview with you."

"Certainly. Have the kindness to walk into the ranch," and Yellow John led the way to the door.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

## A PECULIAR CONTRACT.

At the entrance Yellow John paused.

"Enter, my house is yours!" he declared in the true old Spanish style.

"I feel much honored at having the pleasure of making your acquaintance," Haverill replied, with a ceremonious bow, which the half-breed was prompt to return.

Then the visitor entered the ranch and the half-breed followed, closing the door carefully behind him.

"My men are all good fellows, and there is not one of them whom I do not believe to be as true as steel, but it is always as well to take proper precautions, so as to be on the safe side," Yellow John observed. "Therefore, when a man comes to talk business I always make it a point to arrange matters so that I will be perfectly sure that no one can overhear the conversation."

"Oh, yes, it is always best to be on the safe side," Haverill remarked.

"I made this explanation so that you need not fear to speak freely."

Then the half-breed brought chairs and rolled cigarettes for himself and his guest with Mexican dexterity.

After the cigarettes were lighted, Haverill began the conversation by saying:

"I had Pony Jim come with me so that you would understand that I was in Mrs. Maxwell's confidence."

"Yes, I see, it was a wise precaution," Yellow John observed. "I knew, of course, that there was a new superintendent on the XL Ranch and that his name was Haverill, but as I was not personally acquainted with you, if you had come alone and introduced yourself, I would, undoubtedly, have been careful about what I said, for it would not have been possible for me to know whether you possessed Mrs. Maxwell's confidence or not. You might be her superintendent, you know, and yet not be thoroughly trusted by her."

"Oh, yes, I understand that, and so I had her send word that you need not fear to speak as freely to me as you would to her."

"I recognize the caution of a woman in this," the half-breed observed, with a smile. But really in this case there was not any need of being so particular about the matter. The beeves are all right. They are from Utah, a good hundred miles to the southward, and Mrs. Maxwell need not be under any apprehension that there will be any trouble about them."

"Ah, but I did not come to see you in regard to any cattle," Haverill remarked.

"Is that so?" exclaimed Yellow John, in surprise.

"Yes, she is really overstocked with cattle, and therefore does not care to buy any more at present."

"I can let these go at a very reasonable figure!" the half-breed declared, evidently disappointed.

"No, she would not buy unless you were disposed to almost give them away."

"Well, of course, I would not care to do that."

"She does not expect it, and is sorry that she is not able to make a trade with you, but she has a little bit of business on hand which will put some money in your pocket, if you care to undertake it."

The half-breed did not speak for a few moments, evidently meditating over the matter.

"Well, I will not attempt to disguise from you that I am greatly disappointed," Yellow John said, at last. "I confidently counted upon Mrs. Maxwell taking a good bunch of these beeves, but if she cannot see her way clear to do it, of course she would be foolish to invest. And in regard to any other business, Mrs. Maxwell knows me of old: I am always ready to oblige a friend, particularly if there is a chance for me to put some money in my own pocket by so doing."

"That was Mrs. Maxwell's idea. The business is a little off color, and could not be trusted to any man who could not be depended upon to keep his own counsel."

"Mrs. Maxwell knows that I can be as secret as the grave."

"Oh, yes, she has the most perfect faith in you," Haverill declared. "And therefore she is not at all afraid to trust you with this business."

"She knows that I will not betray her confidence."

"To come directly to the point: there has lately come to Sand Creek a stranger who calls himself Ben Silver; he is a sport, and is more often called the Silver Sharp than by his right name."

"Ah, yes, I have heard of the party!" the half-breed remarked. "He is a great 'chief' and has succeeded in worrying some of the bad men of the neighborhood."

"That is the party. As I said, he pretends to be a sport, and has, apparently, no other business, but Mrs. Maxwell has a suspicion that he is a detective in disguise."

"Oho! a detective?" cried Yellow John, immediately betraying a deep interest.

"Yes, so she thinks."

"And what business has this disguised bloodhound in this neighborhood?"

"That is exactly what she wants to find out."

"Ah, yes, I see! She has a suspicion, possibly, that his business in this neighborhood may have something to do with her."

"Yes, that is her thought. You know that some of her neighbors have at times talked pretty loudly about the XL Ranch being the headquarters for a gang of rustlers, and threats have been made that detectives would be employed to prove the truth of these statements."

"Oh, yes, I have heard of these sayings, but I did not believe that it was anything more than mere wind. I never took any stock in the game," Yellow John observed.

"Neither did Mrs. Maxwell, but the arrival of this detective at Sand Creek has caused her to think that there may be some thing in the matter."

"Well, it really seems as if there was, but is it certain that this Silver Sharp is a detective?" the half-breed asked.

"Yes, there is no doubt about that. A party who knows the man well recognized him and told Mrs. Maxwell; he is a detective, sure enough," Haverill replied.

"The fellow has lots of sand if he thinks he can come here all alone and be able to do anything," Yellow John remarked with a frown on his dark face.

"Ah, but there are others at his back," the other replied. "Mrs. Maxwell has plenty of enemies, you know, and it is her enemies, undoubtedly, who have put this detective on the track."

"Upon my word! if the rascal came after me I would be apt to take such measures that he would not trouble anybody else for one while!" the half-breed declared.

"Ah, there is the point! Is he after Mrs. Maxwell, or somebody else? There are plenty of men in this community who are fugitives from justice, you know, and the fellow may be after one of these men."

"Yes, that is true. If it was publicly announced that a detective from the East was in Sand Creek, there would be twenty or thirty men that I know who would be certain to have urgent business in the country while the detective remained in the town."

"No doubt about that, but Mrs. Maxwell thinks that the probability is great that the bloodhound is after her."

"Well, I know what I would do in such a case!" Yellow John declared. "When a hound is hot on the scent the best way to put an end to the pursuit is to kill the dog. That is good, plain talk, but it is the truth."

"Yes, yes, you are right, no question about it, and I have no hesitation in saying to you that Mrs. Maxwell will not hesitate to strike at this man if she ascertains that he is after her, but there is a doubt in regard to that in her mind, and she wishes to be sure of her ground before she takes any decided action."

"Caramba!" cried the half-breed, with sudden energy, "I think I could find it in my heart to kill a detective whenever I met the scoundrel, no matter whether he was after me or not!"

Haverill laughed, amused by the sudden outbreak.

"Kill the fellow on general principles, eh?"

"Yes, such bloodhounds ought to be put out of the way!"

"Well, Mrs. Maxwell is not quite so bloodthirsty as all that," Haverill replied. "She desires to ascertain if the man is really after her, and if he is, then, it is probable that she will take measures to defeat his game, but until she is certain she will not move against him. Now, in order to find out for certain just what brings the Silver Sharp to Sand Creek she has thought out a little plan and she needs your aid to carry it out."

"I am agreeable!" the half-breed exclaimed, immediately. "What is the plan?"

"To capture this Silver Sharp and carry him off to some secluded retreat and there force him to reveal the business which brings him to this section."

"The chances are great that he will refuse to speak unless measures are taken to make his tongue limber," Yellow John suggested.

"After the man is in our power you can rest assured that we will force him to speak, unless he possesses the courage of the red Indian, who endures the torture of the fire and stake in silence, resolutely suppressing a groan to add to the triumph of his enemies."

"Oh, I will force him to speak!" the half-breed declared, opening his thin lips and displaying his white teeth in an animal-like grin. "Once let me get this bloodhound into my power and if he declines to tell all that we wish to know I will submit him to tortures that the bottomless pit alone can match."

"Oh, I have not any doubt that we can force him to speak if we can only succeed in trapping him—that is the difficult point."

"I can do it!" the half-breed exclaimed. "Do not give yourself any uneasiness on that score. As far as that matter is concerned, it is as good as done already. I have half a dozen men here who would be willing to go through fire if I

gave the word, and I, with their assistance, have done much more difficult jobs than this will be."

"How much will it cost?"

"Oh, I cannot say; it depends upon how hard the task is; but Mrs. Maxwell can rest assured that I will not be unreasonable about the matter."

"All right; that is satisfactory, and the quicker you get at it the better."

"I will not let the grass grow under my feet!" Yellow John declared.

And this brought the interview to a close; Haverill departed, satisfied that the Silver Sharp would now be caged.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE ACTOR-COWBOY.

At the same time that the interview between Yellow John and the superintendent of the XL Ranch was taking place Mrs. Maxwell was holding a conversation with a stranger, who had made his appearance on her place and asked if there was any chance for him to get a job.

Although the man was a stranger to Cattle Kate he is not to the reader, for it was the actor-cowboy, Jeremy Perkins, known to fame as Julian St. George.

Mrs. Maxwell was sitting in the office when one of the cowboys introduced Perkins with the information that he was looking for work.

"Well, you don't look much like a cowboy!" Cattle Kate exclaimed, after taking a good look at the new-comer.

"Ah, touch me not so nearly, gracious madam!" Perkins exclaimed, in his absurd theatrical way, bending himself almost double in an extremely ceremonious bow. "I know that in my outward seeming I do not present the ideal of a cowboy, but I am not a tenderfoot at the business for all that. True, I am not A No. 1, but I am willing to work for low salary. I do not expect the ducats that a first-class man would demand, but I will venture to declare that I will give good service for the lucre I receive."

During this speech Cattle Kate had been intently studying the features of the speaker and when he finished, she exclaimed, abruptly:

"Say! you are no stranger to me! I have seen you before somewhere."

"I should not be surprised; I have been there often," Perkins replied.

"Been where?"

"Somewhere!" responded the other, with a grin.

"Ah! don't come any jokes on me!" Mrs. Maxwell cried, sharply.

"You really must forgive me this once," the other remarked. "I know that the joke is old—a regular bald-headed chestnut, but the opportunity was too good to be lost, and so I hastened to improve it. But touching this matter of our meeting before, I must admit that you have a decided advantage, for I do not remember the circumstance, and that I consider to be truly wonderful, for I have a most retentive memory; rarely do I forget any face of importance, and if I had ever had the pleasure of meeting such a charming woman as yourself, the circumstance would surely be imprinted on the tablets of my mind ne'er to be blotted out while memory holds a seat on this distracted brain!" And then Perkins made another extravagant bow.

"Your recollection is not as good as you think it is!" Mrs. Maxwell declared.

"It is possible that, as the illustrious gentleman, Don Caesar, remarked once upon a time, 'the keeper of the king's conscience has gone hunting with the keeper of the king's memory!'"

"You were an actor once—what is your name, by the way?"

"Perkins, Jeremy Perkins. Yes, you are correct, at a not distant part of my career I was an actor. I trod the histrionic boards and faced the glare of the footlights. But when I disported in these realms of dazzling light I did not bear the name of Jeremy Perkins. Oh, no! that would never do; just think how it would look on the bills of the play. 'Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Mr. Perkins!' Why, that would be enough to queer the whole show. It would not answer at all. No, when I wore the sack and buskins I was known as Julian St. George."

"That is it! that is the name!" cried Mrs. Maxwell. "I was sure I had seen you before!"

"Ah, well, of course, like all great actors it is possible that a great many people know me whom I do not know; it is the fate of greatness. The successful tragedian stands upon the pinnacle of fame, a shining mark for the world to gaze upon. Possibly you have witnessed my Hamlet; at some opera-house you have been held spell-bound by my performance."

"Not a bit of it. I met you at the little variety dive on Clark street, Chicago, Mickey Long's place, and you came there to do straight business in the nigger acts."

Perkins's underjaw dropped and a comical look of confusion appeared on his face.

"Straight business in the nigger acts! Ah, what a fall was there my countrymen! But come to think of it I believe you are right.



Cruel circumstances compelled me to seek a situation in that miserable dive and I assure you that to a legitimate actor, like myself, it was the hardest kind of work to be obliged to get my daily bread by acting as a foil for two negro clowns."

"I do not remember much about you, as I never had anything to do with the negro acts, but I have a good memory for faces and so I recollected you."

"Ah, yes, now I remember; in days gone by you were on the boards, a bright, particular star in the variety line."

"Yes, and I was at the Clark street place when you came there."

"It seems to me that I remember you now, although some years ago, and I am not the best hand in the world at remembering old acquaintances."

"Well, I am," Mrs. Maxwell remarked. "I seldom forget a face. Still, it is not strange that you did not remember me until I recalled myself to your recollection, for if I have not made some mistake about the matter you were generally pretty well filled with liquor about all the time in those days."

"Yes, yes, that is the truth," Perkins remarked, with a melancholy shake of the head. "You have not made any mistake. My spirits were so cast down at being obliged to appear in a low variety dive, that I attempted to raise them up by pouring spirits down," and then the actor-cowboy grinned as though he enjoyed this wretched attempt to be witty.

"Yes, that is the truth!" Mrs. Maxwell exclaimed. "Although you never got drunk enough to interfere with business, yet I don't remember to have ever seen you when you were not more or less under the influence of liquor. How is it with you now? Do you drink as much as ever?"

And Cattle Kate fixed her sharp eyes on the face of the man as she put the question as though she would read his very soul.

"Oh, no, I am as straight as a string now!" the other declared. "And, in fact, that is my normal condition, but at this particular time in Chicago I was terribly down on my luck, as the saying is, and I drained the flowing bowl that I might forget my misery; seeking the waters of lethe, you know."

"Then you keep straight now?"

"Oh, yes, you can depend upon that!" Perkins asserted, in the most positive way.

"I asked the question because I make it a rule not to have any drunken men on my place, and if you are addicted to liquor it isn't of any use for you to come here, for you would get the grand bounce in short order."

"Oh, I assure you that you need have no fear on that score," Perkins declared. "I take my whisky pretty regularly, of course; few men in this region who do not, but I don't make a fool of myself."

"Well, I am not in any particular need of men—that is, cowboys," Mrs. Maxwell remarked, reflectively, "yet I would like to make room for you for old times' sake. I am off the stage now, and shall, in all probability, never face the footlights again, but I have a warm feeling for the profession, and when one of them comes along and asks for a chance to make a living, I do not feel like refusing, if I can possibly make room."

"Yes, yes, I see; I know how that is myself. 'A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind,'" the wandering actor declared. "I do not suppose that there is a calling in the world, the members of which are so ready to help each other as the followers of the stage. Many a stranded professional have I helped out of a tight place, and many a time have I been helped myself. Now, in regard to this cowboy business: I do not profess to be an extra good hand, but I am a fair hustler, and if you have any clerical work to do in the shape of book-keeping, looking after accounts, or anything of that kind, I can assure you that I am away up at the top of the heap, and will not take a back seat for any man in the Territory."

"Well, I believe I could find something for you to do in that line," Mrs. Maxwell said, after a pause, during which she reflected upon the matter. "You can come, anyway, as soon as you like, and I will scare up something for you to do."

"I am ever so much obliged," Perkins declared, with a profound bow. "Your praises are written where every day I turn the page to read," he continued "spouting" in his ridiculous theatrical way.

"And in regard to wages I cannot say what I will be able to give you until I see what I can set you to work at, but you can be sure I will do the best I can for you."

"Oh, that is all right," Perkins replied. "As long as I am sure of my grub, as a cowboy would say, and a dollar or two every now and then for spending money, I will not complain."

"Any port in a storm, eh?"

"Yes, that is about the idea."

"You can hold on here until something better turns up, and you are free to go, you know, whenever you see a chance to better yourself."

"For this relief much thanks," the actor-cowboy declaimed with dignity.

"You can commence right away if you like."

"That will suit me to a dot!"

"I do not suppose that you have any baggage?" Mrs. Maxwell remarked, with a glance at the well-worn sult of the man.

"Oh, my prophetic soul, my uncle," Perkins exclaimed rolling up his eyes until nothing was visible but the whites. "The mystic three balls of the Florentine—two to one that you don't take out what you put in. As you have shrewdly surmised, I have no baggage. My worthy Hebrew uncles—the pawnbrokers—have from time to time kindly relieved me from the necessity of taxing my mind in regard to my valuables."

"Do you wish to come right away?"

"The sooner the better as far as I am concerned."

"All right!"

Then Mrs. Maxwell called in Tom Payson, her foreman, and told him she had engaged Perkins and asked him what work he could be set at.

"We need a hand at the corral for Wild Bill has just cleared out."

"That will suit me!" Perkins declared. "I am a hustler around horses."

So off he went with Payson.

The Silver Sharp had gained a point, his spy was now on the XL Ranch.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE PLOTTERS.

AFTER Haverill took his departure Yellow John reflected for a few minutes over the particulars of the interview.

"This job is a little out of my line," he muttered at last, "but as there is a chance to make a good stake out of it I think I was wise to improve the opportunity. I don't exactly see my way clear to do the trick though. If it was a cattle job I should know exactly how to set about it. I will see what Maverick Hank thinks about the matter."

Then going to the door he called for the party whose name he had mentioned.

Maverick Hank was Yellow John's right-hand man, a tall, thin, yet muscular fellow, with a face tanned a mahogany color by exposure to the sun and wind. He had sharp features with shrewd gray eyes and looked more like a hard-working farmer than anything else.

It would have been a good judge of human nature indeed who would have picked Maverick Hank out for one of the greatest rustlers and desperadoes that there was in the West.

"Sit down, Maverick," said Yellow John, after the other entered. "There is a bit of business that I want to talk over with you."

The other did not seem to be at all surprised at this information, but sat down as if it was a matter of course.

Men who were acquainted with Yellow John and his methods of doing business, shrewdly suspected that Maverick Hank was the brains of the band.

Yellow John was a dashy fellow, a natural-born leader, one who could be depended upon to execute a difficult enterprise in the best possible manner, but he had no head to plan; Maverick Hank, on the contrary, was a capital man to think out a scheme, but when it came to executing it, he lacked ability; but with his brains to plan, and Yellow John to perform, the pair made a strong team.

The chief of the rustlers related the particulars of his interview with Mrs. Maxwell's confidential man; winding up with the declaration that he had no doubt Cattle Kate would come down handsomely if they succeeded in doing the job she required.

"Well, she ought to, for it is my opinion that it will be an extremely difficult piece of work," Maverick Hank replied with a dubious shake of the head.

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, now, that is strange, for it struck me that the job would be an easy one."

"Have you ever seen this Silver Sharp?"

"No, I have not."

"He is an extra good man!" Maverick Hank declared. "A fighter from the word go, too."

"Yes, I understand that he has cleaned out some of the hard men of the town without much trouble."

"That is true, and the fellow has a head on his shoulders too—an extra good one, you know; he is no commonplace sharp, and the man who gets ahead of him will have to get up mighty early in the morning."

"Ain't you rather overrating the fellow?" Yellow John asked, evidently doubtful.

"Not a bit!" Maverick Hank declared. "And you will be of my opinion too after you have made as close a study of the man as I have."

"How did you happen to do so?"

"Why, when I heard what kind of a man he was—how he was clearing out the sharps at poker, the idea came to me that we might make a stake out of him, so I proceeded to see how he could be got at, but, after a careful examination, I came to the conclusion that it would be too much trouble to work the trick."

"Too difficult, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, now that I have agreed to do the job I don't like to back out," Yellow John observed. "Cattle Kate is dead in earnest and she will not object to paying a good price if we succeed in doing the trick. What do you think about the idea of hers that the man is a detective?"

"I should not be surprised if it is so, and I tell you what it is, if he is a detective, and is after her, he will be apt to make it mighty uncomfortable for the XL Ranch people if they do not succeed in putting him out of the way."

"She has taken the alarm, and that is why she sent to secure my assistance," Yellow John remarked. "Now my idea was when I said I would take the job, that the man might be decoyed into some lonely place and there captured."

Maverick Hank shook his head in disapproval.

"You don't think the trick could be worked in that way?"

"No, this man is no common fellow to be caught by any such shallow trick as that, and unless he is so taken by surprise as to be unable to make a fight he would be a match for any ordinary ten or twelve men," the other declared.

Yellow John looked surprised.

"Caramba! you have a good opinion of the fellow!" the rustler chief cried.

"It is warranted by the circumstances of the case!" Maverick Hank declared. "You know that I am no coward; I have proved that I can be depended upon to stand up and fight as long as I see any chance for victory, but I will say that I have got such a good opinion of this man that I would about as lief confront a dozen common men as to face him."

"If he is such a dangerous fellow, how is he to be got at, then?"

"By cunning, for open force will not avail, and as this matter is a little out of my line, suppose you call Boston and let him into the thing."

"Do you think Boston can suggest anything?" Yellow John asked, in a tone that implied doubt.

"Oh, yes; he was a crook in the East, and his game was to decoy and dose men who were worth robbing, so you see this will be right in his line. With Boston, you and I ought to be able to do the job if it can be worked."

"Yes, it would seem so. I will have him in."

Then Yellow John summoned Boston, and in a few moments the man who answered to that name entered the apartment.

He was a rather undersized fellow, with a sleek face and an oily way about him.

Yellow Jack explained the business in hand, and Boston meditated for a few moments before he said anything.

"Well, captain, I fancy from what you have said that it will be a difficult job, but I think it can be worked."

"You have a plan?" exclaimed the rustler chief, eagerly.

"No, I cannot say that I have; only that I agree with Maverick here that the trick must be worked by cunning and not by force, but it will not be possible to form a plan until we ascertain all about the man's habits, and examine the lay of the ground, so as to see just how we can get at him."

This appeared reasonable to the others, and it was decided that the three should proceed to the town at once.

"We will drive a bunch of cattle in and put them in the corral," Yellow Jack announced.

"Then it will not create any remark if we loaf around the town for a week or so, for it will be natural for us to stay there until the cattle are disposed of, you see."

The others agreed that this was a good idea, and so it was carried out.

That afternoon the three drove a herd of cattle to Sand Creek and announced that they were for sale cheap, yet when buyers came they found that Yellow Jack was not disposed to let them go a penny under the market price, and he demanded "spot" cash, too.

Some of the would-be purchasers made no bones of telling Yellow John that he was too stiff in his price and terms, but the half-breed declared that the cattle were extra good ones, and well worth the money, and furthermore announced that he wasn't in any hurry to sell, and could as well stay in the town until he got his price as not.

The three took up their quarters at the hotel, and so came in contact with the Silver Sharp; but none of them made any particular efforts to cultivate his acquaintance.

A week passed away; the cattle were not sold, and still the three remained in the town.

On the last night of the week the three met in Yellow John's apartment.

Boston had said that by the end of the week he thought he could hit upon a plan, and now the trio had met for consultation.

"Well, what do you think about the matter?" Yellow John asked in a cautious way, for the inner walls of the hotel were only composed of thin boards, and any conversation carried on in ordinary tones could easily be heard from one room to another.

"It is as I thought; it will be an extremely difficult job," Boston remarked.



"That was my idea," Maverick Hank observed.

"This man is sharp and shrewd, and is not apt to be caught in any ordinary trap," the crook continued. "We cannot decoy him away with any ghost story, or fairy tale, for he is not the kind of man to be easily fooled."

"Oh, come, don't tell us what can't be done!" the half-breed exclaimed, impatiently. "We don't care for that. If you have hit on any plan, spit it out."

The veteran crook grinned at this manifestation of impatience.

"Now, don't be in a hurry," he said. "This was no easy job that you gave me, and it has taken me some time to think out a plan."

"Ah, you have hit upon one, then?" Yellow John asked.

"Yes, and it is so very simple that I feel like kicking myself to think that I did not get at it before," Boston observed.

"Ah, well, these simple things are sometimes the most difficult to think of," Maverick Hank remarked.

"I made up my mind right at the beginning that he could not be decoyed away, and that any attempt to work a game of that sort would be certain to excite his suspicions, and if he is once placed on his guard the chances are a thousand to one that we could not succeed in trapping him."

"Of course!" the half-breed exclaimed. "There isn't any doubt about that."

"Now, this is my scheme. I have made a close study of the man's habits, since I have been here," Boston explained. "His room is the last one on this side of the house; it is just another such a room as this is; the door is guarded by a stout bar, and when the bar is in its place it would be no easy matter even for an experienced crook like myself to get into the room."

"Yes, I came to that conclusion when I took a look at his room the other day," Maverick Hank observed.

"That is certain enough; after the man is barred in his room there would be no getting at him," the old crook said. "But the bar is the only fastening upon the door, and when it is not up there isn't anything to prevent anybody from getting into the room."

"Yes, yes," that is so," the half-breed remarked, following the words of the other with the utmost eagerness.

"Now my little game is to conceal myself in the room at night, a little while before the time when he usually comes. I have kept a close watch on him and he generally goes to bed about midnight."

"Yes, I have met him two or three times," Yellow John observed.

"I will conceal myself in the room, right by the door, armed with a sand-club, and when he steps over the threshold I will let him have the club for all I am worth. The lamp in the entry will give light enough so that I will be able to see where to hit him and the chances are big that I can lay him out insensible at the first crack."

"Oh, yes, you know exactly where to strike, and you ought to be able to do it," Maverick Hank remarked.

"You two will be in waiting, and after the man is knocked into insensibility, and I think I can work the trick so that he will not even groan, you come forward and we can carry him down to the back door where we can have our horses in waiting; there will not be much chance of meeting anybody at such an hour, and we can get off with our man, and no one will be the wiser."

"The scheme is a good one!" Yellow John declared.

"Oh, yes, and the chances are big that it will go through all right!" Maverick Hank asserted.

"I propose to try it on to-night," the crook remarked.

"The sooner the better!" the half-breed exclaimed.

"Yes, we have lost too much time already to delay," Maverick Hank observed.

And then the three fell to arranging the details of the plot.

#### CHAPTER XXIX.

##### THE ASSAULT.

THANKS to the money that Mrs. Maxwell had advanced to Champagne Billy, he was able to continue the duel at cards with the Silver Sharp, and for the first three nights it really seemed as if his dogged perseverance in sticking to the game when luck was so much against him was going to be rewarded.

The fickle goddess, Dame Fortune, smiled upon him and he rose from the table each night a winner, not to any large amount, but enough to justify him in thinking that the tide of luck had changed at last and was now going to run in his favor.

He said as much to the Silver Sharp, and that gentleman said, with a quiet smile, that he trusted to good playing and not to luck to win money at poker, a reply which annoyed the veteran gambler exceedingly, for it seemed to

imply that he was not as good a player as he believed himself to be.

"Oh, that is all right!" he exclaimed. "It is all very well for you to talk about its being good playing and not luck, but if you hadn't held the cards you would not have corralled the ducats; but luck has changed now, and I am going in to skin you clean, see if I don't!"

"If you do the trick I shall not complain, but I will do my best to give you a tough fight!" the Silver Sharp declared.

"But do not be in too much of a hurry to crow until the victory is won," the sport continued, warningly. "You are not yet out of the woods. Wait until the contest is ended before you set up the shout of triumph."

That this advice was sound, Champagne Billy soon discovered.

On the very next night luck deserted him and he was hardly able to win a single "pot" the whole evening, neither did he lose much, for his hands were so wretchedly bad that they were not worth backing.

There were three others in the game besides the Silver Sharp and the veteran, and as they all held good cards at times Champagne Billy's run of bad luck seemed truly remarkable.

When the game ended the veteran appealed to the rest to know if they ever saw such a fearful run of bad luck, and all replied that they never did, and then the Silver Sharp quietly recalled his words of the previous evening to Champagne Billy's memory.

"What did I tell you about not hollering until you were out of the woods? Am I not a true prophet?"

Champagne Billy was obliged to admit that his luck had not changed as much as it might.

The next evening again his spirits rose, for he got up from the table a winner, while for the first time since the contest began the Silver Sharp was a heavy loser.

"Well, I am not going to boast or predict about how I will come out to-morrow night," the veteran said. "But I have struck it rich to-night, and no mistake!"

"You are right there," the Silver Sharp observed. "You are away ahead to-night and I am away behind, but I am not complaining. To lose once in a while varies the monotony. There would not be any fun in playing cards if a man was to win every time he sat down. It is the element of uncertainty that makes the game so interesting."

"That is true enough, but when a man loses right straight ahead week after week, it is enough to make him wish that cards and the man who invented them were both in blazes together," the veteran replied.

On the sixth night Champagne Billy met his Waterloo. He lost steadily from the time he sat down to the table until he got up, and when the game ended he had just ten dollars left.

"Gentlemen, I am busted all but a ten-spot," he announced. "And I reckon that the quicker I get out of this town the better. I have only got enough left to carry me to Bessemer and give me a stake in some little two-bit game arter I git there. You have been too much for me, and I own up beat." This to the Silver Sharp. "It isn't often that I stack up ag'in' a man and git cleaned out away down to the bed-rock, but this thing has happened this time, for sure. I have seen lucky men in my time—men who seemed to turn everything they touched to gold, but never did I run across a man who could compare with you."

"Much obliged for the compliment," the Silver Sharp remarked. "I stand ready to give you your revenge at any time, you know."

"All right! When I get flush I will tackle you again, but if I see that the luck is running against me I reckon I will know enough to draw out, and not stay in the game until I am skinned clean to the bone."

This remark provoked a general laugh, and then the party broke up.

The game had been such an exciting one that the players had stuck at it longer than usual, and it was now one o'clock.

Everybody in the hotel had gone to bed. The landlord was the last to retire. He had stayed up until half-past twelve, and then seeing that the players were still intent on the game, he had told them that they could play as long as they liked—until morning if it suited them—but he was going to bed, and asked if some one would please look up the house when the game ended and the outsiders took their departure.

The Silver Sharp said he would attend to this matter, and when the others departed he was as good as his word.

After fastening the door the sport ascended the stairs to his apartment, which was situated on the second floor. There was a small lamp fastened to the wall at the head of the stairs which afforded light.

The Silver Sharp passed up the stairs and along the entry until he came to the door of his room which was at the rear of the house.

He opened the door—entered the apartment, and just as he got well across the threshold, a dark form darted forward.

Instinctively the sport raised his arm to ward off the blow which he suspected was coming.

Too late the motion to do any good, for down

upon his head with crushing force came the stroke.

The man who wielded the sand-club, the wily crook from the East, the man who was only known as Boston, having lost his other name, knew exactly where to strike, and the force of the blow felled the Silver Sharp insensible to the ground.

As the Boston had predicted, the assaulted man went down without even uttering a groan, and as he staggered and sunk beneath the weight of the awful blow, the assailant darted forward and caught the Silver Sharp in his arms, so that he should not fall heavily to the floor, and by so doing perhaps wake some of the sleepers in the house.

Hardly had the blow been given when Yellow John and Maverick Hank came from the door of a room on the opposite side of the way, where they had been concealed.

"It is all right," Boston exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. "I have done the trick to the queen's taste! Now, if we can only succeed in getting out of the house, we are all O. K."

"Oh, I reckon there will not be any trouble about that, for there is not a soul stirring," the half-breed remarked.

"Yes, everybody in the hotel is in the soundest kind of slumber, and we ought to be able to get out without any difficulty," Maverick Hank observed.

"Take hold, and let us be off as soon as we can," the crook urged.

"I will go in advance and open the doors," Yellow John said.

Then Maverick Hank took hold of the Silver Sharp by the shoulders, Boston grabbed his legs, and thus they carried him bodily through the entry and down the stairs, taking particular care to tread as noiselessly as possible.

Through the lower entry to the back door the pair went with their burden, Yellow John hastening on ahead.

From the house into the open air the three proceeded, Yellow John taking care to close the door of the house after the two passed through with their burden.

Concealed behind an old shed, a hundred yards or so to the right of the hotel, in the rear, were four horses.

It did not take these experienced rustlers long to tie the insensible man to the back of one of the steeds, and then the three mounted the other horses, and the party rode off in the darkness. The plot had succeeded and the Silver Sharp was entrapped.

#### CHAPTER XXX.

##### UP IN THE HILLS.

It was fully twenty minutes before the Silver Sharp recovered the use of his senses; the cool night air of the prairie, borne against his brow by the motion of his horse, aiding his recovery.

It was a few minutes before his brain worked clearly, for the shock occasioned by the blow had been a tremendous one.

He soon realized what had occurred, and was amazed at the proceeding.

For a man to be "held up" by road-agents, or to be knocked down by skulking desperadoes in the darkness, who then relieved their victim of his wealth—"going through him" in the most expeditious and thorough manner, was too common an occurrence in such a neighborhood as Sand Creek to excite any particular attention, but for a man to be kidnapped—carried off bodily, was something really wonderful, and the Silver Sharp did not know what to make of it.

The more he puzzled his brains over the matter, the greater the mystery seemed to become.

It was a moonlight night, and after the Silver Sharp recovered his senses, he was able to see what his captors were like, but this privilege did little to increase his stock of information, for the rustlers had taken care to adjust black masks over their faces, so their features were concealed.

All that the prisoner was able to make out was that the men who had assaulted him were dressed like cowboys, and so he came to the conclusion that they were probably friends of one of the two "bad" men whose claims to be called a "big chief" he had so thoroughly demolished.

Either the He Wolf of Laramie or the Terror of Bessemer were responsible for his present condition.

On through the night went the rustlers, with the helpless Silver Sharp, straight for the Lone Ranch.

They quitted the open prairie and struck up into the rough and broken country to the north.

A wilder and more desolate region the prisoner had never seen.

The gray light of the coming dawn was lining the eastern skies when the party drew rein beside a lonely ranch, situated on a little open plateau, through which ran the waters of a small mountain stream.

"Stranger you will have to stop with us for a while," said one of the masked men, who from the tone of command in which he spoke the Silver Sharp took to be the leader of the party.



"If you behave yourself and don't attempt to put on any frills I do not doubt that we will get on first-rate together," the man continued. "But if you should attempt to be ugly and show any disposition to kick, you will find us the toughest crowd that you ever struck."

"Oh I reckon we will not have any trouble," the Silver Sharp replied in the most matter-of-fact way, just as if an adventure of this kind was nothing out of the common. "You will find that I am one of the easiest men in the world to get along with, and I am not the kind of man to kick against the pricks. When I find that I am in a tight place I always take matters as easily as possible."

"That is where you are wise," the masked man—who was the half-breed, Yellow John, replied.

"I must say though that I am considerably astonished at this little adventure," the sport remarked. "And I trust that you will not consider that I am unduly inquisitive if I ask what the deuce it means?"

"You will find out in time enough, I reckon," the other replied with a hoarse chuckle. "And it isn't of any use for you to ask questions. Just keep quiet and wait for things to develop."

"Oh, that is all right. I am not in any particular hurry," the Silver Sharp replied. "I only asked out of pure curiosity, you know. I can wait."

"Well, I reckon that you will have to," the other retorted with another chuckle. "And now you will have to excuse us if we go through you," he continued. "You are too good a man to be allowed to hold on to weapons, for you are one of the kind who would be apt to take the notion that you could fight a dozen and clean them out if you had half a chance."

"Yes, you are right there," the sport responded. "If you are willing to give me a show I would be agreeable to fight the whole four of you, and if you laid me out I would not grumble a bit."

The masked men looked at each other as this novel proposal reached their ears.

There was not anything of the braggart in the Silver Sharp's manner, for he was as quiet and matter-of-fact as if there wasn't anything out of the way in his proposal.

"There is no denying that you have made the squarest kind of an offer," the masked leader remarked. "And I am free to say that I do not believe that there is more than one man out of a hundred who would have the sand to make such a proposal if they were situated as you are, but I am not going to accept it, all the same."

"Well, I thought I would risk it," the sport observed. "No harm in that, you know."

"Not a mite!" Yellow John replied, emphatically. "And though I don't hold to the opinion for a minute that you would stand any show at all if you attempted, single-handed, to fight the four of us, yet I am not going to give you the chance."

"Well, it is your say-so, of course. Under the peculiar circumstances, I shall have to allow you to be the judge in the matter."

"Yes, I reckon that is true enough," Yellow John replied, grimly.

"Now, boys, go ahead!"

The masked men searched the Silver Sharp in the most thorough manner.

They took his weapons and his money—the amount of the sport's wealth made their eyes glisten, for he had over five hundred dollars in his pocket—but, to the surprise of Yellow John, no letters or memorandums of any kind were discovered.

"Are you certain that you have made a careful examination?" the half-breed asked.

"Say! what in the world do you want—the earth?" the Silver Sharp queried. "You are inclined to be unreasonable, it seems to me. You have captured over five hundred dollars in clean cash, and a haul of that kind ought to be big enough to satisfy anybody."

"Oh, I am not dissatisfied with the amount of wealth that you panned out," the half-breed replied. "And I don't mind telling you that it is two or three hundred dollars more than I expected. I think that it is safe to say that a gang might hold up fifty men in a neighborhood like Sand Creek, and not strike a single galoot with an even hundred in his pocket."

"Yes, I think that statement is correct, although I cannot profess to be much of a judge in such a matter."

During this conversation the others had been making a fresh search, but it was without results.

"What on earth are you after?" the sport inquired. "Do you expect to find more wealth concealed on my person? Do you take me to be a walking gold-mine? or a national bank out for a holiday?"

"Oh no, it isn't money that I am after," the half-breed replied.

"What then, may I ask?" exclaimed the Silver Sharp in amazement.

"I didn't know but you might have some letters or some other documents," Yellow John remarked.

"Letters or documents!" cried the sport. "Well, I am more puzzled than ever! What

letters or documents did you expect to find on me?"

"Oh, I can't tell exactly, but I reckoned that I might find some which would let me in as to who you are."

"Is there any doubt in regard to that matter?" the Silver Sharp asked, apparently much astonished.

"Oh, yes."

"Well, I was not aware of it, and, really, I do not see why anybody should trouble their heads about the matter. I say that my name is Ben Silver, and my business is speculating, chiefly as to whether I hold a better hand than any other man who sits at the same table. Now there isn't any doubt that I follow this kind of speculating—since I have sojourned in Sand Creek I have given ample proof as to that, and in regard to whether my name is really Ben Silver or not, this isn't exactly the country where people are used to bothering their heads as to whether a man is going by his right name or not."

"That is all as true as preaching," Yellow John replied. "But it is not policy just now for me to let you see just what little game I am playing, so you will have to be content with guessing at it."

"Well, I reckon that will not be apt to keep me awake," the Silver Sharp replied with the air of a philosopher.

"That is right; there is nothing like taking things easy," the half-breed remarked. "Now we are going to lock you up in the feed-house yonder," and the speaker pointed to a small building to the right of the ranch, and in a line between the house and the corral.

"There will be a man on guard all the time armed with a Winchester rifle, and the orders will be to shoot you down without mercy if you succeed in getting out of the building. I think the odds are big though that you will not be able to do that, for the walls are mighty stout ones and without the aid of an ax a man would have a hard time to get through them."

"Yes, I should imagine so," the sport remarked, after taking a look at the building.

"I thought I would mention about the man with the rifle so that you would not be taken by surprise," Yellow John said, with a chuckle.

"Much obliged! It would be awkward for a man to be taken unawares in such a way; but don't think me inquisitive—how long do you propose to keep me shut up, and what is the object of the proceeding?"

"You will find out all in good time," the rustler chief replied. "Be patient and you will soon know just as much about this affair as I do."

The Silver Sharp nodded as if he was perfectly satisfied with the assurance, and then was conducted to the house and placed within it.

Three hours later Yellow John's messenger was on his way to the Maxwell Ranch bearing the intelligence that the job was done.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### SEEKING INFORMATION.

It was Maverick Hank who bore the message, and he sought out Haverill and delivered the news to him.

"I will ride over with you right away," Haverill said, and in ten minutes the pair were on the road.

There was no conversation between the two during the ride of any interest, and in due time they arrived at the half-breed's lonely ranch.

Haverill was conducted to Yellow John's apartment, and he found the half-breed stretched out at his ease upon a couch of buffalo-skins, smoking a cigarette.

Maverick Hank, after conducting the visitor into the presence of the chief of the rustlers, discreetly withdrew.

"Well, you succeeded in doing the work in pretty quick time," Haverill remarked as he helped himself to a chair.

"Yes, it was a very difficult job, though," Yellow John replied. "I think I would rather take a contract to handle ten ordinary men than this one sharp."

"Oh, he is a good man; there is no mistake about that," Haverill admitted.

"Right you are! as good a man as ever struck this town of Sand Creek, and don't you forget it!" the rustler chief declared, emphatically.

"Did you succeed in doing the job without making any disturbance?"

"Oh, yes! we snaked him out of the town without a soul in it knowing anything about the matter. It was really a beautifully worked job," and then Yellow John related the particulars of the affair.

"You are right, it was excellently planned and most successfully carried out."

"I do not usually make a botch of any job that I see my way clear to accept," the half-breed declared, boastfully.

"And when the absence of the sport was discovered this morning, it would not be apt to give rise to any suspicion that anything was wrong," Haverill remarked, pursuing a train of thought which had arisen in his mind.

"Oh, no, men of his stamp are apt to come and go without warning," Yellow John observed. "These sharps are birds of passage and they

often take flight without taking the trouble to bid good-by to any one, particularly when they have succeeded in making a good haul."

"And this was the case with this sharp, I understand," Haverill remarked. "If the reports which are flying around can be believed he has feathered his nest pretty well during his sojourn in Sand Creek."

"So some of the boys were saying."

"Yes, I heard that he had won eight or ten thousand dollars, but I think that amount is exaggerated."

"I reckon it is," the half-breed remarked with a doubtful shake of the head. "Eight or ten thousand dollars is a big sum for a man to win at short cards. It is not like breaking a faro-bank with a big backing, where a man stands a chance to win ten to twenty thousand dollars in a single night."

"The man has won largely though," Haverill asserted. "I know this to be a fact, for Champagne Billy, the old sport, is a great friend of Mrs. Maxwell, and he confided to her that this Silver Sport was ahead of him to the tune of nearly three thousand dollars, and I know for a fact that he has won heavily from other parties."

"Yes, but nothing like the sum that he skinned Champagne Billy out of," the half-breed replied. "You see I had to loaf around the town some time, waiting for a good chance to work my game, and so I heard all about the Silver Sharp and his doings."

"I understood you were in town trying to sell a bunch of cattle."

"Yes, that was a good excuse for my being in Sand Creek, and I wouldn't make a trade with any one until the afternoon of the day on the night of which I made up my mind to spring the trap to catch my game; then I sold the cattle, so that when I and my boys disappeared, no one would wonder at the circumstance."

"Of course, after the cattle were sold, it was the most natural thing in the world for you to clear out."

"Yes, that was my idea."

"Well, how much were you going to charge for that job?" Haverill asked. "I suppose that you made a rich haul out of the Sharp—got three or four thousand dollars, didn't you?"

A look of disgust came over the dark face of the half-breed.

"Three or four thousand dollars!" he exclaimed. "Caramba! what are you giving me? Bah! you ought to know better than that! This Silver Sharp is not a fool, to carry around a fortune in his pocket!"

"A man of this kind generally carries about all his wealth on his person," Haverill observed.

"That was not true in regard to this man," Yellow John declared. "I do not know the exact amount, for I turned it over to my boys for their share, but I believe it was a trifle over a hundred dollars."

"It is nothing to me, of course," the other hastened to declare. "Be the sum much or little, it is your plunder, and the amount is nothing to any one else. I spoke carelessly, you know, and without any idea of prying into matters which do not concern me."

"Certainly, of course, I understand that," the half-breed replied. "Well, in regard to my charge: taking into consideration the fact that my boys secured some plunder, I do not think that it will be out of the way if I say an even hundred dollars."

"No, I consider that to be a fair price," and Haverill drew a roll of bills from his pocket and counted out a hundred dollars, which he gave to Yellow John.

"Thanks!" exclaimed the rustler chief, as he stowed away the money in an inside pocket. "I put a reasonable price upon the job for Mrs. Maxwell's sake. She has put money in my way on several occasions, and I am one of the men who never goes back on a friend."

"Yes, I understand that such is your reputation."

"This hundred, you know, is for this one job only—the capture of the man and the bringing of him to this place," the half-breed said. "If there is anything more to be done—if it is required that the man should have a fatal sickness here so that he never leaves this place alive, it will cost more." And as Yellow John spoke, his voice deepened, and he leaned toward the XL ranchman as though he feared that his words would be overheard.

"Certainly, of course," Haverill replied, a dark look appearing on his face similar to the one on the features of the half-breed. "I am aware that if it is desirable to have you do anything more in the matter, it will, of course, cost more money."

"I thought I would speak so there would not be any misunderstanding about the thing," Yellow John explained.

"Oh, yes, it is always best to have matters of this kind clearly understood," Haverill remarked.

"It is my idea that you will need my services, for I think you will find that you have got hold of a tough customer."

"How does the man take the matter?"

"As cool as a cucumber. You never saw a more level-headed fellow in your life. I have seen many a cool hand in my time, but I never



met a fellow to equal this sharp!" the half-breed declared, emphatically.

"He was astonished, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, he said he could not possibly conceive why any such game should be played on him, but he did not manifest any alarm. In fact, he acted as if being knocked on the head and then lugged off to parts unknown was a common every-day occurrence."

"You searched him thoroughly, of course?"

"Yes; got his weapons and his wealth all right, but no letters or documents of any kind."

"Well, I hardly expected that you would find any," Haverill replied, in a thoughtful way. "If this man is the shrewd, skillful bloodhound that I take him to be, he is far too wise to carry any proofs upon his person of who and what he is."

"That is possibly true," Yellow John remarked. "But it seems to me that you are giving the man credit for an awful amount of caution. Now how could he foresee that anything of this kind was likely to happen?"

"I don't suppose that he did either foresee or anticipate such an event. I have no doubt that he felt confident that his disguise was so perfect that no one would suspect he was a detective; but he was wise enough to understand that in this uncertain world of ours it is the unexpected that is always happening, and so he took particular precautions to be sure not to have anything in the shape of letters or memorandums about his clothes so that if any accident happened to him his business would not be disclosed."

"Well, whether he is a sharp or a detective there is no doubt that he is as cool a galoot, and as big a chief as ever struck this Territory. Durn me if he didn't offer to fight four of us single-handed if we would give him the chance!" the rustler chief declared.

"Oh, he is a dangerous man!" the other exclaimed. "There is no doubt at all about that, and that is why I am so anxious to find out if he is a detective."

"I reckon that you have got a tough job before you!" Yellow John remarked, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"I anticipated that, but as I have all the advantages on my side I ought to be able to win," Haverill replied.

"That is so."

"Where is he?"

"Locked up in the feed-house yonder," and the half-breed pointed through the window to the building which served as a prison-house for the Silver Sharp.

"Well, I must have a talk with him; but it is necessary that I should assume some disguise, for the man has seen me in the town half a dozen times, and, although we have never spoken together, he would be apt to recognize me."

"Oh, yes, you must look out for that," Yellow John remarked. "We were careful to wear masks and our old clothes, and as all cowboys are pretty much alike as far as dress goes, there is not much danger of his being able to spot us if he manages to get out of this scrape all right."

"Give me a mask and I will slip on a poncho, which will cover me up so that he will not be able to see what I have on," and as Haverill spoke he took up a rubber blanket with a hole in the center for the head to pass through, the poncho of the Mexican, which is so common in the prairie regions of the West.

After Haverill put on the poncho, the half-breed gave him a mask and a stiff-brimmed Mexican sombrero in place of the light-colored felt hat which the XL ranchman wore.

Thus equipped, his appearance was so totally changed that it would have puzzled his most intimate acquaintance to have recognized him.

"The house is dark—there are no windows in it," Yellow John explained; "only some holes in the upper part of the door, which will give ample light for you to see what you are about, but not strong enough for him to make out what kind of a man you are."

"That will do splendidly; but I don't think that there is any danger of his recognizing me in such an excellent disguise as this, even if he had all the advantage of the broad daylight."

"Well, I reckon that there isn't, but it is always well to be on the safe side."

Then the half-breed conducted the disguised XL ranchman to the prison pen of the Silver Sharp; the door was unlocked and Haverill entered.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE EXAMINATION.

THE room wherein the Silver Sharp was confined was small, about twelve by fifteen, and was totally bare with the exception of an old candle-box which stood on end near the door and a buffalo-robe which the prisoner had folded up and placed in a corner.

On one side of the couch thus rudely formed, he sat, and he was using the other for a table, and, despite the dimness of the light, was engaged in a game of solitaire, in which he was so interested that he hardly looked up as the door opened to admit the ranchman.

The searchers had found a pack of cards in his pocket when they had overhauled him, but

as the cards were old and of little value, he had been permitted to retain them.

"You are in a tight place, my bold Silver Sharp!" the masked man cried as he entered, his hand on the butt of a revolver which he held, ready-cocked, by his side."

Then the door swung to and again the partial darkness prevailed.

"Excuse me for a moment, will you?" the Silver Sharp remarked, politely. "I am just about bringing this hand to a successful termination, and if you are an admirer of this fascinating game you are probably aware that it is only about once in every twenty times that even the most successful player succeeds in getting the thing to come out straight, but this time the cards are running beautifully!"

"Oh, I have no time to waste in any such nonsense!" Haverill cried, roughly, assuming a hoarse voice to disguise his own natural tones.

"Nonsense! Ah, you do not do justice to this interesting and scientific game!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed. "Next to a good game of poker with a jolly lot of fellows who are not afraid to back their cards with their ducats, I enjoy the lonely game of solitaire."

"Never mind your game! I have come to talk business with you!" the new-comer declared.

"Well, I am your man, of course, and if you don't feel like waiting, the game must cease, but it was really coming out beautifully," and the Silver Sharp gave a sigh of regret as he gathered the cards into a solid pack with the snap of the experienced player.

Haverill took a seat upon the candle-box by the door, resting the cocked revolver upon his knee so that the glistening muzzle threatened the prisoner.

"And I said when I entered, you are in a mighty tight place," he remarked.

"Well, judging from the appearances as far as I have got I think you are about right there," the prisoner observed with an air of deep reflection.

"There is no doubt about it at all."

"And yet to me it is the strangest thing in the world how the affair happened!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed with the air of a man who was deeply perplexed.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, what is the object of all this trouble? Why have I been brought to this secluded spot and guarded as carefully as though I was some notorious criminal?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Indeed I cannot."

"Oh, yes, you can, if you try."

"Upon my word I cannot!" the Silver Sharp protested. "One thing I must admit though, and that is that I was never good at riddles. My talent don't seem to run in that direction."

"I am afraid that you are not doing yourself justice," the other remarked in an extremely sarcastic manner.

"Oh, yes, I am! don't you make any mistake in regard to that. I am not one of the kind of men who hides his light under a bushel!" the sport asserted.

"Well, if I have not made a mistake in regard to your character you are just the kind of man to be particularly expert in reading riddles."

"I reckon you have made a mistake," the other replied.

"Oh, no, it is right in your line, for you make a business of it."

"Now you are giving me another riddle!" the Silver Sharp declared.

"You know what I mean well enough!" Haverill exclaimed, sternly. "You are playing your game very well indeed, but you cannot pull the wool over my eyes!"

"Upon my word that is an operation which I have not the slightest inclination to try," the sport replied.

"It would not be of any use for you to try it, for the game will not work."

"I will take your word for it!" the prisoner exclaimed, with a laugh.

"You are a bold man to come out into a country like this on such an errand."

"Oh, yes, I am bold enough; I will admit that I generally succeed in holding my own. There are a couple of men in the neighborhood of Sand Creek who can testify in regard to that," the sport observed. "Just hunt up the He Wolf of Laramie, or the Terror of Bessemer, and ask them what their opinion is about the matter."

"I presume that you have powerful backing, or else you would never have dared to engage in the enterprise."

"Well, if I have any backers, they are extremely backward in coming forward; so much so that I have never been able to lay eyes upon them."

"This is no jesting matter I will have you to know!" Haverill exclaimed, angrily.

"I am not joking," the sport protested. "I am telling you the honest truth, and if I smile it is because I see that you are so persistent in barking up the wrong tree."

"This denial does you no good, for I know you!" the XL ranchman exclaimed.

"Do you?" the sport asked in a quizzical way.

"Well, now, I might come the old joke and in-

quire where you got introduced to me, but as I see that you do not like humor I will refrain."

"Yes, your game is as well known to me as it is to yourself."

"Is it?" and the Silver Sharp shook his head in a doubtful way. "Then all I have to say is that it is a wonder, for as I haven't any particular game, that I know of, for you to be acquainted with, it borders on the miraculous."

"You are playing your part well, but it will not serve you," Haverill declared. "All the denial in the world will not alter the fact that I know you."

"Oh, I do not doubt you, if you are from the Sand Creek neighborhood. I have been in the town now for some little time, and almost everybody knows me."

"Very true—as a card-sharp—a man who lives by his skill in handling the pasteboards!"

"Well, I suppose I will have to admit that juggling cards is my best holt!"

"How many in the town suspect that you are in this section of the country in disguise?"

The sport appeared to be astonished.

"I reckon you could clean out the town with that question, for I do not believe that there is a man in the neighborhood who suspects such a thing!" he declared.

"Yes, that is the truth!" Haverill exclaimed.

"You are here in disguise; I do not suspect it—I know it!"

"You are an extremely smart man and I am sorry that you have your face hidden so that I cannot see who you are!" the Silver Sharp remarked, sarcastically.

"Never mind as to who I am—that is not the question before the meeting," the other retorted. "The subject we are discussing is as to who you are."

"Well, I am myself, and you can bet high on that!" the sport exclaimed in a mocking way.

"You are a detective officer from the East!"

The Silver Sharp laughed outright.

"Oh, come now, this is really too rich!" he declared as soon as his merriment subsided. "I have been accused of being a good many things during my wanderings up and down on the earth, but this is the first time I was ever picked out for a detective."

"Of course you will attempt to get out of it; that is only natural under the circumstances," Haverill remarked. "But you might as well own right up. I know that you are a detective from the East, although I must admit that you have played the character of a traveling card-sharp to the life since you struck this section of country."

"Yes, I flatter myself that I have done pretty well in that line," the other observed, complacently. "I have heard no complaint regarding my ability as a card-player, but, on the contrary, there are quite a number of men in Sand Creek who would be worth more money than they now possess if they had not undertaken to show me that they knew more about cards than I did."

"You have played the part with exceeding skill, but you are a detective all the same."

"All right! have it that way if you feel better to believe that such is the fact. I am sure that it does not make any difference to me," the sport remarked.

"I not only know that you are a detective but I have a shrewd suspicion as to the business that brings you into this section."

"Oh, say, you had better hang out your shingle as a fortune-teller at once!" the Silver Sharp declared. "It is evident that you possess more knowledge than usually falls to the lot of mortal men."

"Your banter does not alter the truth!" Haverill declared, roughly. "I know your game as well as you know it yourself I tell you, and have taken measures to defeat it."

"Ah, a light begins to break in upon me!" the Silver Sport exclaimed. "I presume it is to you then that I am indebted for the position I now occupy, eh?"

"Yes, it was at my instigation that you were brought here."

"Well, I must admit that you worked the game well, and you fellows did the job right up to the handle; there is no disputing that fact," the sport observed in a reflective way.

"Now, that you see that you are discovered, don't you think that it would be wise for you to make a clean breast of it?"

"Oh, come now, you are going altogether too far!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed. "I have not admitted that your suspicion is correct, or anything of the kind."

"Yes, but I know that it is!" the ranchman declared.

"You really must excuse me if I am obliged to contradict you, point blank! You don't know anything of the kind. You have a suspicion, but no proof, and it isn't quite the square thing to condemn a man on suspicion, you know."

"Bah! you cannot make anything by denying the truth, and you might as well own up. You are in a tight place now and whether you succeed in escaping from it with your life or not depends entirely upon yourself."

"Well, if it depends upon me, you can bet all you are worth that I am going to get out of it!"



the sport asserted. "I am not at all prepared to cash in my checks at present."

"But the only chance you have is to own right up that you are a detective, and tell what business brought you to this neighborhood."

"Well, if you possess the knowledge which you claim, there is no necessity for my doing that, for you know all about it," the sport remarked, sarcastically.

"I see that you will force me to resort to unpleasant measures!" Haverill exclaimed in a threatening way. "And you can rest assured that I shall not hesitate to compel you to speak. You ought to understand from what has already occurred that I am a man who means business from the word go!"

"Oh, yes, I have not the least doubt that you are in earnest."

"Why not speak, then? You will find that you cannot get out of this hole until you do, and it seems to me that the quicker you speak the better it will be for you."

"Oh, but I haven't anything to say!" the other replied, impatiently. "If I was a detective I would be a fool to give my business away, for it would not be possible for you or anybody else to know anything about it, notwithstanding your assertions that you know just what business brings me to Sand Creek."

"You think that I am trying to play a bluff game on you?"

"Why, of course you are!" the Silver Sharp asserted. "And I should be a shallow-minded fool indeed if I were to be deceived by your statement."

"I will have to convince you that you are wrong, and then, perhaps, you will see that it will be wiser and better for you to speak than to keep silent."

"All right, go ahead! You may be able to do it, but I have my doubts in regard to the matter."

"In the first place, your name is not Ben Silver, and you are not a card-sharp by occupation."

"I reckon that there are some men in Sand Creek who will dispute the truth of the latter assertion," the other remarked, with a smile.

"You are a detective officer from the East—from New York city—and you have been employed by men who are enemies of Mrs. Kate Maxwell, the mistress of the XL Ranch, to come out here for the purpose of making trouble for her. These men suspect that her cowboys have been rustling, and they expect by your aid to be able to bring the crime home to her."

"Ah, and you suspect that this is my game?"

"Yes, I am sure of it!"

"Well, I would not advise you to bet much money on it, for, like many another supposed to be sure thing, it may turn out not to be half so sure as you think."

"You deny that this is your game?"

"I do most decidedly!" the sport exclaimed in an emphatic manner. "Why, just calculate the chances for yourself. Doesn't it really seem absurd to think that Mrs. Maxwell's enemies should send clear to New York to engage a detective when far better men for a job of this kind could be had west of the Mississippi? What good would the average New York detective be to hunt out cattle-rustlers? Any one of General Cook's men of Denver, the Rocky Mountain detective police, could give the city detective half a hundred points and beat him at the game, every time!"

"There is a good deal of truth in what you say," the other admitted. "Still, men do queer things sometimes. One thing is certain: you are a New York detective, there is no mistake about that, although it may be possible that you did not come here to work against Mrs. Maxwell."

"You are certain about the detective part, eh?" the sport queried, with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, and it isn't any use for you to deny it, for I know better."

"It is to Mrs. Maxwell then that I am indebted for this little surprise party?" the Silver Sharp remarked.

"Oh, no, not to Mrs. Maxwell herself," the other explained. "But you understand that if there has been any rustling done, Cattle Kate, being a woman, could not very well take part in the business. The work would have to be done by others."

"Yes, I comprehended, and the men who did the work have taken alarm at my presence?"

"Exactly, and they mean to make you show your hand!"

"Yes, yes, I see."

"If you are after them, this little surprise party will serve to give you an idea of the kind of men with whom you will have to deal. They mean business, every time!"

"So it would seem."

"And they have no idea of allowing one man to make trouble for them, right on their own stamping grounds, even though he was the best detective that ever came out of the East."

"Well, under the circumstances, a man could hardly blame them."

"They want to show you that if you have come out here with any idea of making it warm for the rustlers you have taken the biggest kind of a contract on your hands."

"I understand."

"They want you to know that you cannot possibly work the game. You see you have tumbled right into the trap before you had a chance to make a move."

"Oh, at present the advantages are decidedly on your side; there is no mistake about that, for you have succeeded in getting me in the tightest kind of a place."

"You can get out easily enough if you want to."

"How?"

"Make a clean breast of it, as I said before," the other replied. "Confess that you have come here for the express purpose of hunting down these rustlers: give an account of the thing from beginning to end, particularly the names of the men who put up this job. We fellows who are suspected of doing this rustling are anxious to know who the men are that put up this job on us."

"Want to know so as to get a chance to square the thing with them, eh?"

"Yes, that is the idea."

"Well, my dear fellow, you are away off!" the Silver Sharp declared in the most emphatic manner. "I did not come out here to hunt any rustlers, don't know any thing about the matter at all, no men hired me and so I cannot give you the information you desire."

"Do you expect me to believe this?" Haverill asked, sneeringly.

"Well now, I don't care two wags of a dog's tail whether you believe it or not. It is the truth and that is all there is to it!" the sport declared in the most emphatic manner.

"But if you did not come to this neighborhood on this business then you came on some other detective quest, and if that is so, it does not concern us at all, and we have no reason to meddle with you. Of course, I am aware that there is, probably, a dozen men in the neighborhood of Sand Creek who are fugitives from justice, and if you have come after one of these men it is no business of ours, so all you have to do is to speak freely; tell me all the circumstances of the affair; I will give you my word to keep quiet about the matter, unless the man happens to be a particular friend of mine, and the chances are a million to one against that, and you shall go free, of course giving me your promise to keep quiet in regard to this matter."

The Silver Sharp shook his head.

"You refuse?" cried the other, in a tone full of wrath.

"I have to, don't you see?" the sport explained. "I haven't anything to say. I might go to work and stuff you with a pack of lies for the sake of getting out of this scrape, but then the odds are big that you would not do me any good, therefore I prefer to speak the truth and tell you that I have nothing to say."

"Well, if you are going to be ugly you will find that I can be ugly too," Haverill declared, in a tone of menace.

"My dear fellow tell me something that I don't know!" the sharp exclaimed. "That goes without saying."

"You are perfectly helpless in my power!"

"I reckon that you are right there," the sharp admitted, in a tone of cool unconcern.

"And being a helpless prisoner don't you suppose that I can find a way to make you speak?"

"Now you are going into the riddle business again, although I have you that I am no good in that line at all."

"I have tamed obstinate men before now, and I fancy that I will break your will down before I get through with you."

"Well, you ought to, all the advantages are on your side," the Silver Sharp retorted. "If you cannot win this game, situated as you are, then you never should play."

"Oh, I am going to win it easily enough; don't you worry about that!" Haverill declared.

"If you were in Sand Creek now, you would be thinking of dinner just about this time."

"Yes, I presume I should, for I suppose it is near noon, although I am not able to tell what the exact time is, for when your fellows went through me they did not fail to relieve me of my watch."

"Well, I will not attempt to prevent you from thinking about dinner; but that is all you can do, for not a morsel will you get."

"Ah! going to try a little starvation, eh?" observed the sport, seemingly not at all disturbed by the threat.

"Yes, not a bite nor a sup shall pass your lips until you agree to give me the information that I desire."

"You don't mean it?" and the Silver Sharp rested his chin in his hand, and assumed an air of deep reflection.

The other watched him with the eyes of a hawk. He fancied his words had made an impression.

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

##### A SURPRISE.

You will find that I will be as good as my word!" the XL ranchman declared. "Neither food nor drink shall pass your lips until you comply with my request."

"Well, hunger and thirst are mighty power-

ful arguments," the sport observed, in a reflective way.

"Yes, I cannot conceive of anything more likely to make a man come to his milk," Haverill replied.

"And you will not believe me when I tell you that I haven't anything to say?"

"No, for I know better!"

"I suppose, then, that like the coon, I had better come down."

"If you know when you are well off you will."

"Your fellows searched me pretty thoroughly, but they are not as smart as they might be," the Silver Sharp observed. "If they had been up to snuff they would have understood, when they looked so particularly after letters or documents, that any man with a grain of common sense, would not carry important things of that kind in his pockets, where every Tom, Dick and Harry would be apt to get at them. Now, if they had taken the trouble to run their hands in the inside of my coat, they might have discovered that there was something there besides the lining." And as he finished, the sport opened his coat, so as to expose the inside.

Haverill bent eagerly forward, satisfied that at last he was about to succeed in his purpose, but the Silver Sharp was playing possum, for the moment he saw that his jailer was off his guard, with a tiger-like spring he leaped upon him.

Haverill started up and attempted to use his weapon, but the iron-like fist of the sport smote him between the eyes just as he was about to fire, so that his aim was disturbed and the bullet whistled harmlessly in the air over the head of the assailant.

Down went the XL ranchman, dropping like a log in his tracks from the force of the awful blow.

The Silver Sharp snatched the revolver out of his hand as he fell.

The door flew open.

As it happened, the two men who had aided the rustler chief to abduct the sport were close by the entrance.

They had their revolvers out, warned by the noise of the scuffle in the house that there was trouble ahead, but before either of the pair could fire, the Silver Sharp managed to discharge two shots, dropping Boston with an ugly wound in the breast, and sending a ball through Maverick Hank's shoulder.

Boston's pistol exploded as he fell, and the ball tore harmlessly along the ground.

Maverick Hank's aim was anything but true, owing to the excitement of the moment, and his bullet buried itself in the door-casing over the head of the sharp.

But though his bullet did no damage, he was smart enough to cut off the Silver Sharp's escape by swinging the door shut.

But the sport had no idea of coming out of the house, for the report of the "guns" had aroused the ranch, and the cowboys were making their appearance, Winchesters in hand, and the Silver Sharp was too old a bird not to know that with only a revolver to oppose to the rifles, he stood no chance for his life by making a fight in the open air.

As long as he staid in the house the only way his foes could get at him was by the open door, and so all the advantage was on his side.

Maverick Hank had locked the door after shutting it, and the sport understood that no attack could be made on him until the door was unlocked.

And then, too, he calculated that after the taste his captors had got of his fighting qualities, they would not be in a hurry to attack him in his fortress.

Haverill was beginning to show signs of reviving from the stupor into which he had been thrown by the terrible blow which he received, and the Silver Sharp turned his attention to him.

He took the other's handkerchief out of his pocket and tied his wrists firmly together with it, then removed the loose silk handkerchief which he wore knotted around his collar and bound Haverill's ankles.

This work completed, he helped himself to the other revolver which Haverill carried, and upon an examination of the ranchman's pockets, was lucky enough to discover a box of cartridges which fitted the revolvers.

"Oho! I fancy I will be able to stand a siege now!" he exclaimed. "All that I was afraid of was that in the event of an attack I should run out of ammunition, but now I am all right."

He recharged the revolver, then took the candle-box and placed it on its flat side in front of the door, folded the buffalo-robe lengthwise, and placed it across the box, then dragged Haverill over to the door and laid him on the novel couch, thus completely blocking the entrance.

By the time that the XL ranchman was placed in this position, he had recovered the use of his senses.

"What are you about?" he exclaimed, angrily, smarting under his defeat.

"I am utilizing you for a breastwork," the sharp replied. "Your friends may be foolish enough to attack me here, and if they do the chances are that you will be able to stop some of their bullets—that is, if they are rash enough to



persist in the attack after they see the fix that you are in."

"You will be murdered in cold blood for this!" the ranchman exclaimed, hoarsely.

"Ah, do you think so?" the Silver Sharp exclaimed in a bantering tone. "Well, your gang have got to get hold of me first, and I reckon that before that is done there will be some killing around this ranch. You don't seem to understand that the advantage of the position is with me just now, and that it will take a small army to get me out of this."

"They will starve you out!" Haverill exclaimed.

"Do you think they will try that game?" the sharp exclaimed, and there was a quizzical expression on his face.

"Well, that will be kinder rough on me and equally rough on you, for if I hunger and thirst it is certain that you will hunger and thirst also, and that will be a great satisfaction to me, you know, for misery loves company; then it will be such an apt illustration too of the old saying about the hunter caught in his own trap."

Haverill ground his teeth in rage. Never were truer words spoken. He was, indeed, caught in the snare which he had devised.

"You made a big mistake in your calculation," the sharp continued. "There is an old saying that 'despair sometimes turns defeated men into victors,' and that is where the old Spanish proverb which says: 'build a bridge of silver for a fleeing enemy,' comes in. After you have got a man down it is not always wise to press him too hard."

"Well, you have got the best of the struggle at present," the ranchman said in an extremely sulky way. "And I suppose I will have to make some arrangement with you."

"Yes, that is the only course open to you as far as I can see," the other remarked. "But who are you anyway? I have quite a curiosity to make your acquaintance."

Then the Silver Sharp removed the mask from the face of the other, revealing the features of the ranchman, dark with rage.

"Oh! it is Mr. Thomas Haverill, the superintendent of Mrs. Maxwell's XL Ranch!" the Silver Sharp exclaimed, but there was no particular accent of surprise in his tone.

"Well, do you know, I had an idea all the time that it was you?"

"Is it possible?" Haverill exclaimed, somewhat amazed by the statement.

"Oh, yes, and I think I know the game that you have tried to play, too."

"That is plain enough to you now, of course. After what I have said you understand that I was doing the best I could for Mrs. Maxwell."

"Oh, no; that was only a blind!" the sharp exclaimed.

"A blind!" Haverill cried, a dark look on his face.

"Yes, you pretended to think that I was a detective employed by Mrs. Maxwell's enemies on purpose to get me to disclose my actual business in this section; you suspected that I was a bloodhound of the law, but you did not think that I came here on XL Ranch business."

"Why should I think otherwise?" the ranchman exclaimed, affecting to be greatly astonished.

"Because you are one of the transplants from the East who have left their country for their country's good. You are one of the men who are wanted, and when you got the suspicion that I was a detective officer you immediately jumped to the conclusion that I had come after you, and so you got up this clever little scheme to head me off. It has not turned out just as you expected, though."

"Oh, this idea is ridiculous!" Haverill declared, but it was evident that he was very much disturbed.

"Oh, no, it is the truth!" the Silver Sharp asserted. "But this little clever trick of yours has resulted in my capturing you, so that if I am a detective in quest of you, I have got you exactly where I want you."

"Yes, but you will have a tough time in getting me off of this ranch!" Haverill declared.

"Well, there is no telling how this affair will turn out," the sport rejoined. "These scoundrels here have been in with you and no doubt will try and do all they can to help you now; but suppose I should say to them: 'Boys, it will be money in your pockets if you let me take this man. He is a criminal from the East, and there is a reward of ten thousand dollars for his capture. Help me to put him in the hands of the law, and I will divide the reward with you?'"

Haverill's breath came thick and hard, and his face became deadly pale.

"What do you suppose these worthless scoundrels would say to that now?" the sharp continued. "You know the men, of course, better than I do, and do you think that they could resist the temptation to clutch five thousand dollars when it could be gained so easily? Do you believe that the sentiment of honor is so strong among them that they would refuse to gain a sum like that merely because they had been pards with you in this venture, and were old friends of Mrs. Maxwell?"

It was plain that Haverill was suffering ter-

rible torture, but with a great effort he endeavored to conceal his terror, and said:

"All this is so ridiculous that it is not worth discussing. The idea that there is such a princely reward as ten thousand dollars offered for a man like myself is simply absurd. I am no bank-robber—no defaulting cashier, who has got away with fifty or a hundred thousand dollars, the greater part of which it is hoped can be recovered by offering a great reward for the capture of the man who stole the money."

"No, that is true enough, but there are cases where private vengeance comes in play, and oftentimes a man who has money will offer a large reward for the accomplishment of a certain object just for the purpose of gaining the applause of the world; to pose on the pedestal of liberality, so to speak."

"It is not so in my case," Haverill declared, his voice hoarse and unnatural.

"Well, it is fortunate for you if it isn't, but let me tell you, my friend, that if you are one of the men who are wanted anywhere, that you made a big mistake when you went into the race to beat old Washakie's runners."

"How so?" the other demanded.

"Because the performance gave a clew to your identity. There are not many men in this country who can run a race sufficiently swift to beat a crack Indian racer, and supposing I was a detective in search of a certain fugitive and suspected that you was the party, all I had to do after you showed what you could do as a runner was to send a dispatch to the East and ask, was my man celebrated as a foot racer and if the answer came, 'Yes, a champion,' I should be pretty certain that I was on the right scent."

"But you have not received any message in regard to me!" Haverill exclaimed, looking at the sharp with an expression on his face like to the one which appears on the features of a man found guilty and waiting for the judge's sentence.

"Oh, I did not say I was a detective, you know; I was only supposing a case."

Then the sound of footsteps without attracted the Silver Sharp's attention.

"Hello! I reckon your pards are coming up for business, but I am ready to give them the warmest kind of a reception!" the sport declared.

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### ANOTHER TURN IN AFFAIRS.

"HELLO, you galoot in there!" Yellow John cried.

"Hello yourself and see how you like it!" was the Silver Sharp's reply.

"Do you know that you have got yourself in a regular hornets' nest here?" was the inquiry.

"No, I don't, but I know that you will get into a hornets' nest if you attempt to enter this house!" the sport retorted.

"When we get hold of you we will skin you alive!"

"Before you do get hold of me I reckon I will fill the greater part of you scoundrels so full of holes that a sieve will be a fool to you!"

"You had better give up peaceably if you want us to spare your life!" the half-breed declared.

"Oh, hosh! it isn't of any use for you to try a bluff game with me," the Silver Sharp exclaimed, contemptuously. "I have got the best of this fight so far, and I reckon I can hold on to my advantage too."

"You are just tempting Providence!" the other declared, angrily.

"Oh, no, I am not; Heaven helps those who help themselves, and I am taking the best possible care of myself now. You are talking like a fool, and if you had any sense you would know it. I am armed with two six-shooters, and have a box of cartridges, so I do not lack for ammunition. Now just try and force a way in here, and see how nicely I will lay your men out! I don't know how many there are of you, but I am good for twenty-five or thirty at the least!"

This bold defiance irritated Yellow John exceedingly, the more so because he knew that there was a great deal of truth in the statement.

He had only eight men all told on the place besides himself, and two of those had been rendered incapable of taking any part in an attack by the bullets of the sport.

Boston was so badly wounded that it was doubtful if he would get over it, and the ball in Maverick Hank's shoulder had compelled him to draw out of the fight.

So, counting himself, the half-breed could only muster seven men, and therefore he hesitated to make an open attack.

Yellow John was brave enough, but, like the most of the mixed bloods, he had a spice of caution in his composition, and he was not the man to rush heedlessly into a fight without considering all the circumstances in advance.

It was as certain as anything could be that if an attempt was made to force a way into the house, the Silver Sharp would undoubtedly be able to kill or wound three or four men before the attackers could succeed in getting a shot at him at all, and if four out of the seven were knocked out of the fight right at the beginning, the chances were big that the other three would not succeed in getting the sport out of his fort.

Yellow John was in a quandary.

He had thought that there might be a chance to secure the sport, although he ought to have known better than to make the attempt.

"I am going to give you one last chance," he declared.

"All right. I am glad of it," the Sharp replied.

"If you don't come out of that house inside of five minutes, we will set fire to the shanty!" Yellow John threatened.

"Well, I reckon that is the only game that you can play under the circumstances," the besieged man retorted. "But it will be rough on your pard here, for if you set fire to the house and roast me, he will get a taste of the fire too. I have got him here, bound hand and foot, and braced against the door so as to serve for a breastwork, and, by the way, that reminds me that I ought to caution you to be careful how you fire through the door, because the chances are a hundred to one that you will hit him instead of me."

Yellow John and his cowboys looked at each other, perplexed by the announcement.

"Oh, I reckon you are only trying to stuff us now!" the half-breed declared.

"Haverill, hadn't you better tell your pards that what I have said is the truth?" the Silver Sharp asked, speaking sufficiently loud so that the men without could hear his words.

It was a hard pill for the XL ranchman to swallow, but he saw that there was no help for it, so he spoke:

"What he says is correct," Haverill declared. "I am tied hand and foot so that I cannot help myself."

"Yes, he is in an exceedingly tight place," the sport observed. "There is no doubt that his position is a great deal worse than mine, for if you set fire to the house, as you threaten, you can depend upon it that I will hold on here until it gets so hot that I cannot possibly stand it, then I will make a bold dash for liberty, but as your pard will not be able to follow my example, it stands to reason that he will be roasted, for by that time the heat will be so intense that no one will be able to get into the building and you cannot rescue him."

"You would not leave me here to be roasted alive?" Haverill exclaimed in dismay.

"You must not blame me," the Silver Sharp replied. "It is your pards on the outside who are responsible. Tell them to draw off so I can have a chance to escape, and that will get you out of the hole."

"Well, I would rather make such a bargain than stay here to be burnt to death!" the XL ranchman exclaimed.

"Well, now, that is where your head is level," the sport observed. "But I say, no gum-game, you know. You must warn your pards that they must not put up any job on me. They must not pretend to go away and then, after you are out of this trouble, jump on me."

"Oh, I will act honestly with you—you can depend upon that!" Haverill protested.

"Well, maybe you would, but your pards might not," the sharp observed. "And, as I always like to be on the safe side, I will take measures so that your gang cannot play any trick upon me."

"What do you propose to do?" the XL ranchman asked, a dark look gathering on his face. He did not like the turn that affairs were taking, for it had been his anticipation that after he was safe out of his present peril the half-breed and his rustlers would make short work of the daring sport.

"I intend to take you right along with me until I am safe out of this danger, and if your pards make any hostile movement it will surely cost you your life."

Haverill's under jaw dropped.

He was in the toils, and now he fully understood that the sport did not intend to be tricked out of the advantage which he had gained.

The conversation at this point was interrupted by the hurried approach of a cowboy—the man who played the part of sentinel, and the announcement which he delivered in an excited manner to the half-breed came distinctly to the ears of the two.

"Cap'n, thar's a big body of hossmen coming over the perarie, an' they are heading right for the ranch—twenty or thirty men, and the most of them are armed with rifles too, for I can see the barrels glistening in the sun!"

This was startling news and the half-breeds looked aghast for a moment.

"You haven't made any mistake?" Yellow John cried.

"Nary a mistake!" the man declared. "And from the way they are comidg on it is safe to say that they will be hyer inside of ten minutes!"

"In that case then the quicker we vamose the ranch the better!" the half-breed cried.

And so the half-breed and his cowboys stood not upon the order of their going, but fled at the best speed of their horses.

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### JUSTICE AT LAST.

HAVERILL groaned aloud as the clatter of the horses' hoofs fell upon his ears—the sound that announced the flight of the rustlers.



"You have the devil's own luck!" he declared in a voice hoarse with rage.

"Yes, that is not an unnatural supposition, if this statement is true," the Silver Sharp responded, a decided sign of doubt in his manner. "It may be, you know, that this is only some cunning trick of your pards to throw me off my guard. I have heard of such schemes being worked, and successfully too, but I am too old a bird to be caught with chaff."

"Oh, I don't think that there is any trick about the matter," Haverill replied in a gloomy way. "Fortune has favored you, and, though I played a bold game, I have lost."

"Yes, I reckon that there isn't much doubt about that," the sport rejoined. "It is mighty funny this band of armed men making their appearance just at this time," he added, reflectively. "I don't understand it, but the explanation will soon come."

Then the Silver Sharp looked through one of the holes in the door.

Soon the horsemen came in sight.

The sentinel had not made any mistake, there were twenty-two men in the party, and the most of them were armed with rifles.

When the sport caught sight of the foremost squadron the mystery of the timely arrival of the party was explained.

In the front-ranks rode the actor-cowboy, Perkins.

"Aha! my old friend has played a part like the mouse in the fable who nibbled the net and set the lion free," the Silver Sharp murmured.

Beside Perkins rode Jim Robinson, the sheriff of Sweetwater county, and about all the prominent men of Sand Creek were in the cavalcade, including the He Wolf of Laramie, the Terror of Bessemer, and the Shoshone chief, Old Washakie.

When the party got within fifty feet of the ranch they halted and the horsemen cast inquiring glances around, for the ranch appeared to be deserted.

"It is a sheriff's posse," the Silver Sharp observed. "Haverill, I am afraid that your goose is cooked!"

Then he raised his voice and hallooed to the horsemen:

"Here, this way—in the little house—unlock the door!"

This injunction was soon obeyed, and the Silver Sharp, stepping over Haverill, came from the house.

"I am mighty glad to see you, sheriff!" he declared. "You came right in the nick of time, for a party of rustlers had me cooped, and, although, thanks to my revolvers, they did not dare to come in, yet neither could I get out, and there is no telling how the thing would have turned out had you not arrived."

The sheriff, a big, burly man with a brown beard and a determined look, known far and wide as one of the most resolute men in the Territory, advanced to meet the sport.

"You can thank your cowboy friend thar," the sheriff said in a low tone, so that the rest could not hear him, and he nodded toward the actor-cowboy as he spoke. "He was the man that engineered the thing. He is on the XL Ranch, and I supposed from what he said that he was playing the spy thar for you."

"Yes, that is so," the Silver Sharp remarked.

"Well, he did his work right up to the handle, for he kept his eyes open, and when Maverick Hank, one of Yellowstone John's rustlers, came after the superintendent, and the two rode away together, he suspected that something was up and came to town to warn you; then, when he found that you had mysteriously disappeared, he came to me and said he reckoned that a job had been put up on you. I raised a posse, got Old Washakie, he lifted the trail in no time, and here we are!"

"The game is run down at last," the sharp remarked. "I have secured my man. Got handcuffs with you?"

"Oh, yes; I never travel without my bracelets!" the sheriff replied with a grin, dismounting as he spoke.

Then the two approached Haverill.

The sport untied the fastening which confined his ankles and bade him rise.

When Haverill was on his feet the Silver Sharp removed the bandage which bound the other's wrists.

The XL ranchman was deadly pale; he understood that the removal of the fastenings did not imply that he was to be set free.

"You know the sheriff, I presume?" the sport said.

"Yes," replied Haverill in a husky voice.

"I have an unpleasant duty to perform," the official remarked, drawing a pair of handcuffs from his pocket as he spoke. "You are my prisoner! Have the kindness to hold up your hands so I can snap the bracelets on."

"Have you not made some mistake? Of what am I accused?" Haverill asked, as he submitted to have the handcuffs placed upon his wrists.

"Oh, no, no mistake, I reckon," the sheriff replied. "You are wanted on a pretty heinous charge—murder!"

"For murder?" the prisoner exclaimed with white lips.

"Yes, you are supposed to be one Roderick Bellingham of New York City, who killed Andrew Peterkin in that place about a year ago."

"You will find that you have made a mistake; I am not the man!" the prisoner declared.

"Well, the son of the murdered man I saw in Sand Creek, having arrived there this morning, summoned by this gentleman," and the sheriff nodded to the Silver Sharp, "and he will be able to decide whether you are the man or not."

"You are an expert bloodhound, but you have made a mistake this time," the accused man said to the sport with bitter accent.

Then the party took their way back to Sand Creek.

When they arrived there the prisoner was conducted to a room in the hotel where Milton Peterkin, whom the reader will remember as having been introduced in the first chapters of our story, was in waiting; the sheriff and the Silver Sharp accompanied him.

Peterkin took a good look at the handcuffed man.

"Yes, this is Roderick Bellingham," he announced. "He has succeeded in altering his appearance wonderfully but I recognize him; he is the man!"

"Can I speak with you alone for a few minutes?" the prisoner asked.

"Well, I don't see what possible good it will do you," the New Yorker remarked, "but I suppose I might gratify your wish."

"You need not fear violence; he is unarmed," the sheriff observed.

"Oh, there is no danger of my trying anything of that kind; what good would it do me?" the ranchman exclaimed.

The detective—for the Silver Sharp was indeed a New York bloodhound in disguise—and the sheriff withdrew.

"Now, then, what do you want to say?" Peterkin exclaimed, roughly, when they were alone.

"I wish to recall the past to your memory."

"What good will it do you?"

"Who was it that led me into crime? Did you not get more than one-half of all the money that I stole from your father, and though the death of your sire does lie at my door, it was not a deliberate murder on my part. Heaven knows I had no wish to kill the old man!"

"You must make that apparent when you are tried, and it may save your neck!" the other remarked, in a brutal way.

"Why have you bounded me when you are almost as guilty as myself?" the prisoner demanded.

"No one will believe such a statement!" the other exclaimed, angrily. "And if you are wise you will not persist in this accusation, for it will only make your fate worse!"

"You have hunted me down because you know that though my hand struck the blow which robbed your father of his life, yet, in reality, you were almost as guilty of his murder as I, for if you had not tempted me into crime the chain of accidents which led to the murder could not have occurred, and now I ask you to give me some chance for my life!"

"No, not a bit of mercy will I show you!" the other cried, fiercely. "If I were to do so the world would indeed believe that I had been your accomplice."

"You devil!" cried the prisoner, in the hoarse accents of rage, and then he strack the New Yorker a violent blow in the face which knocked him over against the wall.

He had managed to slip the handcuff from his right wrist.

His hands were long and slender, and the manacles were the old-fashioned, clumsy kind.

Then Bellingham ran to the open window and leaped through it with the agility of a trained acrobat; he reached the ground without in safety, the distance being about eight feet.

Peterkin uttered a cry of rage, drew a revolver, and, rushing to the window, took deliberate aim at the fugitive, who was now running with wonderful swiftness toward a pony fastened to a post on the other side of the street.

The New Yorker pulled the trigger of his weapon—there was a sharp explosion, and the detective and sheriff, hastening into the room, found Peterkin weltering in his blood.

The revolver had exploded in his hands, and the cylinder, flying upward, had imbedded itself in his brain.

The fugitive reached the horse, leaped upon his back, tore the lariat loose and brought it down with great violence upon the beast's flank.

As it happened, the horse was an ugly, bucking animal, which its owner had brought in to sell on account of its viciousness, and the moment he felt the sting of the lash he gave a demon-like squeal, bounded into the middle of the street, reared, bucked and kicked as if possessed of the devil.

Bellingham was speedily unseated; only an Indian or one of the expert cowboy-riders could possibly have kept the saddle.

Over the beast's shoulders he went, striking on his head, then toppled on his side and remained motionless.

From the window the Silver Sharp and the sheriff had witnessed the downfall.

Down-stairs they ran, and hurried to the side of the fallen man.

Roderick Bellingham had passed beyond the reach of earthly justice, for his neck had been broken by the terrible fall.

Thus, by accident, the two men who were almost equally responsible for the death of old Peterkin had perished.

Does it not seem as if the hand of a stern but just Providence had stricken them down?

Our tale is told, and but a few more words remain to be said.

The Silver Sharp's work being done he returned to the East, leaving behind a reputation for skill and daring which any man might envy.

Cattle Kate was truly sorrowful when she learned the particulars of the death of the man to whom she had taken such a fancy, and had the detective, whom she thought was to blame in the matter, remained in the neighborhood, it is possible that she would have attempted to revenge Haverill's death, but the detective was far away; he had not departed for fear of Cattle Kate's anger, but because there was work for him to do, for the threats of all the desperadoes that the Wild West has ever known would not scare such a man as the Silver Sharp.

THE END.

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